

THE LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

No. 1646.—VOL. LXIV.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING NOVEMBER 17, 1894.

[PUBLISHED WEEKLY.]



GUYON STOOPEO AND STOLE HIS FIRST KISS UNDER THE SPRAY OF MIGNONETTE.

VERNON HEATHCOTE'S MISDEED.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

STRAINS of music streamed forth into the frosty air, as carriage after carriage deposited its load of beauty and fashion at the hospitable doors of Marchmont Towers.

Bright eyes were sparkling with the expectation of conquests, sweet lips were smiling in order to ensure them.

Stiff brocades or more voluptuous satins swept over the marble pavement of the hall; diamonds were as plentiful as dewdrops at the hour of dawn; pretty faces followed each other in quick succession; crowds of young men in irreproachable evening dress hovered about the doors of the ballroom with the outward indifference of the indolent Turk, but with the inward eagerness of hope and desire as their eyes wandered after favourite partners, who nodded and passed on.

Lady Muriel Heathcote stood just inside the

folding-doors of the first reception-room, a dark-haired, sinister-looking man at her right hand, who seemed to be anxious to share with his lovely hostess in the trouble of receiving her guests.

She was the embodiment of all that was best and brightest and most beautiful in woman's form and nature.

Those who looked on her face forgot to admire the jewels which encircled her soft white throat or her perfectly-moulded arms, the delicate laces which fell in cascades down the front of her dress, or the creamy roses sparkling with diamond dew-drops, which nestled amongst the frills.

They forgot everything, in fact, but the winning grace of her smile, the sweet low tones of her musical voice.

Vernon Heathcote maintained his post by his cousin's side till the last guest was supposed to have arrived, and there was a general move into the drawing-room.

He was forty-five years of age, with regular features, a cold cynical smile, and a heart that had never quickened its beat for the sake of any woman on earth till he saw Muriel, in all the budding promise of her girlhood, fly down the

steps of the terrace at The Towers with outstretched hands to meet him.

He had been wandering about the Continent for years, unable to digest his disappointment when his cousin, the Earl of Mountguyon, a sworn bachelor, suddenly took it into his head to marry, and so destroyed hopes of succeeding to the Marchmont estates, &c.

Certainly nothing was further from his intentions than falling in love with the girl who had supplanted him. But at the sight of her beauty his resolution went down like a ninepin, and in a few months' time he was her most unwished-for slave.

Guyon Macdougall, tall, good-looking, with a certain air of distinction about the carriage of his head, and a distinct want of cash in his pockets, with fears that were kept steadily in the background, and hopes out of all proportion to his fortunes, rushing continually to the front, watched Muriel Heathcote's every movement as intently and unremittingly as if she had been a thoroughbred specially exhibited for his benefit.

As she entered the ball-room, leaning on the arm of some local grandee, he placed himself in front of her.

"How many will you spare me?" he asked, entreatingly.

"How many?" with a smile. "One for certain, the rest must be left to chance."

"Which I shall hope to make by good luck into half-a-dozen certainties. The first waltz," hastily inscribing his name, "and the last?" interrogatively, as his eyes rested on hers. "I like the last better than all the rest." As she did not say "no" he put his name down again, and walked away triumphant, at least an inch taller than he was before.

Vernon Heathcote looked after him with a scowl; but a pretty brunette, Netta Forgethlynn, gave him her sweetest smile, as he lounged against the wall by her side.

"So unfortunate, is it not, poor Lord Mountguyon being so ill to-day?" she remarked, with the evident intention of drawing his attention to her own attractive self.

"What is it? Do you know?"

"His heart, I suppose," she answered, carelessly. "It was always shaky; but it is a pity that it should become worse just for Christmas Eve."

"A pity; yes," he said, slowly, his own heart full of concern for the loving daughter, whose every hope and thought he knew to be centred on her father. No wonder that there was that wistful look in her eyes, and that he heard a little sigh escape her lips in the midst of all her smiles.

Miss Forgethlynn went off with her partner, but Macdougall never missed her. He waited impatiently for the Lancers to be over, and when the last note was played and the various couples began to promenade up and down the room he lost no time in interrupting Lady Muriel's solemn progress with her grandeur.

"This is our dance," with a deferential bow.

"Excuse me," said the old gentleman, with twinkling eyes, "but this is our *walk*; and I'll trouble you to leave us in peace. You young fellows are always in such a hurry."

"But—but—I can't afford to lose a chance. Here's a whole crowd of them coming to claim her."

"Just because you have given them the scent away with you. When the music begins I promise—"

"There's the first bar."

"So there is, confound you! Lady Muriel, I am afraid that is the signal for surrender," and he reluctantly released her.

"Let us begin at once," and Macdougall slipped his arm eagerly round the girl's slender waist. She shook her head.

"Not till I have seen after my guests. Oh, dear!" with a doleful sigh, "it is so dreadful without papa."

"Shan't I do instead?"

"Not in the least. Without papa everything falls flat."

"Thanks; you are very encouraging."

"You never need encouragement," with a laughing glance up into his face.

"Is that why I never get it?"

"I think you do. At least, you act as if you did."

"I am obliged to, or I should be left in the background. Now, what do you want to do?"

"Find partners for all the plain girls, the pretty ones can look after themselves. Do you think your friend, Mr. Graham, would dance with Emily Spence?"

"He might, if you asked him; but he wouldn't like it."

"And men are so selfish, they think it so dreadful to do what they dislike."

"And women are so unreasonable; they expect to be danced with, whatever they are like."

"But they don't expect to have nothing but good-looking partners, as you do."

"I am so modest that I want only one."

"But that one is not Emily Spence. If it were I should respect you."

"Why? Because I had no taste?"

"Because you had a kind heart."

"The very next dance shall be hers."

"Thank you," with the sweetest smile, "I

know she is rather ugly, and awkward, and fat; but what does that matter, after all? She is as good as gold, and would make a most excellent wife."

"Are you recommending her to me?"

"No, because you have not the sense to prefer a good heart to a good profile."

"I like them combined," with a downward glance, answered by a fleeting blush.

Not till the partnerless were suited with partners would Lady Muriel consent to dance. Macdougall complained so bitterly at being robbed of three quarters of his waltz that she was obliged to soothe him with the promise of another.

When it came at last, as everything does come to those who know how to wait, they slipped out of the room together, at Guyon's earnest request, to pay a visit to the invalid.

Guyon, Earl of Mountguyon, was lying on the sofa in his dressing-room, his white hair pillowed on a crimson velvet cushion. His face was very pale, his regular features drawn and pinched; but as his daughter came into the room, followed by his favourite godson, he looked up with a transient smile.

"Well, and how is all going on downstairs? Glad to see you, my boy. It is a comfort to me to think you are here, to look after my poor little girl. She thought she couldn't get on without her father, but she manages it pretty well, eh? The old man isn't missed after all!"

"That he is," said Macdougall earnestly. "We should all be a thousand times jollier if you were downstairs amongst us."

"That we should," murmured Muriel, pressing her lips to his wrinkled forehead.

After asking a few questions about the various members of Macdougall's family the earl closed his eyes.

"What do you think of him?" and Muriel looked up into Guyon's face with visible anxiety.

He tried to seem more hopeful than he really was. "A little tired," he said, "looks thinner, too, than he was last year."

They had spoken in whispers, but Lord Mountguyon's ears were quick. "Yes, you are right, I am tired out; and you had better leave me alone. Come, child, what is the matter with you? You are not going to get rid of me, so you needn't think it."

"Oh, papa, you know I couldn't do without you," and she hid her soft, fair cheek against his.

"She does me credit, doesn't she, Guyon? And remember, my boy, I've always liked you. And when I am going to—to cut it," he held out his hand, and Macdougall, as he clasped it warmly, noticed how it trembled. "I should like you to be with her—to look after her. Don't forget, for live as long as I may, I shall never alter my mind."

"I won't forget."

His voice was choked, and the tears were in his eyes as he turned away.

"Now, be off with you. I mean to be as merry as a grig to-morrow, so as to have a happy Christmas with you all. Good-night, my little one," kissing her fondly. "Don't dance too long, or you will fall asleep in the sermon to-morrow."

Muriel kissed him again and again, as if it were impossible for her to tear herself away. It was so silly to be anxious because he was rather unwell, but she felt as if she would have given anything only to sit with him for half-an-hour, instead of going downstairs into the gaiety of the brilliantly-lighted rooms.

Side by side they walked silently down the corridor, not noticing Vernon Heathcote, who stepped into the open door-way of a bedroom to avoid them as they passed.

There was not a soul in the broad gallery which ran round the hall; a buzz of voices came from down below, with the ringing of happy laughter, mixed with the exciting strains of the band. Up here in the shadowy corridors there was solitude and peace.

Guyon's heart felt as if it would burst. He had meant to keep silence through many years

to come, but after what had fallen from her father further reticence was impossible.

"Lady Muriel, I am a poor man," he began, hoarsely, and something in his voice made her own heart beat so fast that she leant against the railing of the gallery for support, "and I'm not half worthy of you, but I love you with my whole heart and soul. Speak to me, darling. Are you angry with me?"

Her face bent lower and lower, but a timid little hand stole softly into his. Then, in the sudden rapture of hope, he caught her to his breast, and, scarcely believing all that her silence seemed to imply, held her against his heart.

"Is it possible? Do you really love me?" looking down with passionate admiration at her beauty.

Her bosom was heaving, her sweet face covered with blushes. She could not bear his glance. Frightened, yet inexpressibly happy, she hid her face like a timid child against his coat. For one whole minute they stood thus, with wildly-beating hearts and a joy too deep for words.

Sweetly and tenderly came the soft notes of the "Golden Love" waltzes from down below. There was a movement in the hall—the spell was broken. Hastily freeing herself from his encircling arm, she said,—

"They will miss me; I must go."

Then he stooped and stole his first kiss under the spray of mistletoe hanging from the lamp-overhead.

"You will never change your mind!" looking earnestly into her hazel eyes. "Remember I am a beggar compared to you."

"If I have enough for both what does it matter?" she answered with a trustful smile. And side by side, as they meant to go through life together, they went down the broad staircase into the hall. At the foot of the stairs stood Netta Forgethlynn and her partner.

She looked up into their happy faces with a slight frown upon her own.

"Where have you hidden yourselves all this while? Everyone has been wondering where you were."

"We have been up to see papa."

"Oh, indeed, and so has Mr. Vernon Heathcote. I should have thought Lord Mountguyon would have been better without so many."

"Mr. Heathcote was not there," said Macdougall briefly.

"He left us five minutes ago; didn't he, Mr. Graham? promising to tell me how he was."

"I wonder that we did not meet him. Papa hopes to be able to spend Christmas with us all to-morrow. Isn't that delightful?"

Supper was over, but dances succeeded dances with ever-increasing energy.

Guyon Macdougall had more than done his duty by the plain Miss Spence; for in his ardent desire to please his hostess, he had devoted himself during a polka and a Lancers to her amusement; but Netta Forgethlynn, with whom he had flirted as a matter of course, whenever they met at garden-party or ball, he had entirely neglected, much to that young lady's amazement.

Her jealous eyes watched him about the room, and she soon perceived that if Lady Muriel Heathcote were otherwise engaged, he did not care for any other partner.

This discovery filled her with wrath. She liked the good-looking young attaché better than anyone else, except herself, and it had pleased her to think he was tied to her train.

Now that he had apparently shaken off his fetters his value increased tenfold, and she was ready to risk anything and everything in order to call him back.

She tried to attract him with sidelong glances from under the fringe of her long dark lashes, but with much mortification she found that they had no effect whatever.

He was blind, absolutely blind to everyone but Muriel, and with many inward vows of future revenge she decided to leave him alone for the present.

"You have tired yourself out," and Guyon looked down with pitying eyes on the small weary

face of his betrothed. "Come into the conservatory and rest for a minute."

"Not now, I can't be spared. It isn't that I'm tired." Her lips trembled, and her cheeks grew white.

"What is it then?" He bent his head, so as to hear her soft whisper.

"A dreadful feeling has just come over me," and she shivered. "I would give worlds just to run up and see that papa was all right."

"Shall I go instead?"

"Oh, if you would," with a glad smile of gratitude. "It is very silly of me, I know, but I feel so nervous."

He went away quickly, her eyes following his straight tall figure with loving admiration.

"And now, my dear," said a solemn old dowager, advancing with rustling skirts, "let me be the first to wish you a happy Christmas, and many of them, just as happy as this."

Just as happy as this! If she had only known. Vernon Heathcote, who had just sauntered into the room with a face as white as his own shirt, heard the words, and shuddered.

CHAPTER II.

Soon after Lady Muriel had quitted her father, Vernon Heathcote came softly into the room.

"Ah, come in, Vernon," said the Earl, wearily. "I wanted to say a few words to you before Dormer arrives to-morrow."

"Dormer!" exclaimed Heathcote, in surprise.

"Yes, he is so busy that he could not spare an hour before, so he said he would run down on Christmas Day. It was rather hard upon him, but he consented to stretch a point, as I was so anxious."

"Why do you want to see him? It seems a pity."

"Ah! but it must be done. You would scarcely believe it," after waiting for a moment, for his breath was very short, he went on: "All these years since my marriage I have never made my will."

"Good Heavens!" after a pause. "You made one before?"

"Yes, when you were my heir, and we were more like brothers than cousins. Of course, in those days, I left everything to you. If I were to die to-night you would be master of Marchmont Towers, and my poor little girl a beggar."

"But you feel better, don't you?" with great eagerness.

"Yes, the oppression on my chest is lighter and my heart steadier. Just give me a little salvolatile; talking tires me dreadfully."

Heathcote measured some in a glass, and put it to his lips.

"Thanks; now I can go on. I don't know why it was, but somehow since my marriage you and I were not such friends as we were before. Don't deny it; it is useless. I suppose it was some natural sense of disappointment at the first. You had begun to look upon Marchmont as your inheritance."

"Nothing of the kind," said the other, earnestly.

"Nonsense, it must have been that. I know you better than you know yourself. It was most natural, as I said before."

"Natural or not," said Heathcote, irritably, "it is not true. I own to a paltry feeling of jealousy—that is all. You had made so much of me beforehand, and after Lady Mountguyon's arrival I was nobody."

"You can't say I neglected you."

"Not that exactly. You were always ready enough to pay my bills," with a cynical smile, as if that were the very least a cousin could do.

"I was not alluding to money matters," and the Earl gave a slight frown. "I always told you to consider Marchmont as your home."

"Yes, but you know very well that this place could never be a home to me when the mistress of it hated me with all her heart."

"My wife may not have liked you as much as I did, but hatred goes far beyond the mark. You see that she was of a peculiarly frank dis-

position, like my little Muriel, and she thought you too reserved."

"A man can't help his nature," sullenly; "but Muriel, thank Heaven, doesn't think it necessary to hate me because I don't blate out everything that comes into my mind."

"She couldn't hate anyone to save her life."

At the thought of his child the father's face brightened into a smile.

"I shall look to you to be her friend and adviser when I am gone."

"You may trust me to do all that may could do."

Something in his voice must have betrayed his long-cherished secret, for the Earl added, hastily,—

"As to her marriage, I dare say you will say that I have acted like a fool." Heathcote bent forward, biting his lip, his eyes fixed upon his cousin's wasted face—"but I gave a hint to that young fellow Macdougall that if he liked to ask her he might."

"You did!" breathlessly.

"Yes, I did, this very evening."

"Mountguyon, you must be mad," Heathcote literally gasped for breath.

"Not I. My brain is the strongest part of me."

"The boy's a 'nobody,' and Muriel—why Muriel ought to marry a Duke!"

"Don't you think she might be satisfied with an Earl?" and Lord Mountguyon smiled, for after his death Heathcote would succeed to his title, as well as his estates.

"Maybe," with impassable gravity.

"But to return to our old subject. In the will that Dormer is to draw up far me to-morrow you will find that I have not forgotten you."

"Don't talk of that," hastily.

"But I must, and there is no use in pretending to be squeamish"—he put his hand to his head as if to collect his thoughts—"Muriel will have Marchmont and the house in town; you will have ten thousand pounds and the little place in Bedfordshire. The place, goes with the title, so there is no generosity on my part, and the money will help you to keep it up."

Heathcote sprang to his feet overpowered by conflicting emotions. He could scarcely contain himself.

A paltry ten thousand, indeed! for a man who was accustomed for many years of his life to look forward to the possession of one of the finest homes in England, and a princely fortune into the bargain! And all was to be kept for the girl in order to enable her to marry a foolish, insignificant boy, who had nothing to recommend him but his good-looking face and his name of Guyon.

It was maddening. He walked to the window, threw open the shutter, and looked out.

"Oh, if he would only be obliging enough to die to-night," he thought to himself, as he watched the dark clouds seudding across the starlit sky. With no pity for the fragile life in which so many hopes were centred, he calmly wished his benefactor out of the way, in order that he might step into his best pair of shoes.

"What sort of night is it?"

"Cloudy; I think we shall have some more snow."

"I daresay we shall. Be so kind as to tell Williams, if you happen to come across him, not to disturb me, as I feel inclined to go to sleep."

"Shall I help you to bed?"

"No; I am more comfortable here. Just throw another log on the fire, and give me my tiger-skin. There, that will do, perfectly. Good-night, old man; I have a lot more to tell you to-morrow, but I am too tired, now. Don't let Muriel fidget herself about me."

With those words on his lips he turned over on his right side, and fell asleep. Vernon Heathcote left the room and joined the brilliant throng downstairs.

Lady Mornington, who had known him from a boy, thought she had never found him half so agreeable before as she sat by his side at the bottom of the supper table; and she even went so far as to hint that the heiress of Marchmont

might have a worse fate in life than marrying the heir to her father's title. She noticed that his glass was often replenished with champagne, but then the Earl's wine was so far better than the ordinary run of ball champagne, that perhaps a little excess was excusable, especially as it did not seem to produce any effect on its recipient.

When the supper was over, and he was free, he went up to Muriel, and asked her to dance with him.

"Impossible," she said, with a smile. "My card is more than full."

"I think you might have reserved one for me," and his face looked eternally itself.

"But you never dance," looking up at him in surprise.

"No reason why I never should."

"Perhaps not. So sorry you did not tell me before," and she moved away.

"Stay one moment," laying his hand upon her arm. The touch thrilled him to the very heart, but left her perfectly unmoved. "Is it true that you are going to marry that boy, Guyon Macdougall?"

"Hush!" with a quick flush. "How did you know?"

"No matter. Is it true?"

"I think so," as her eyes drooped shyly, and a happy smile hovered round her mouth.

Involuntarily his fingers closed tightly upon her soft white arm, till she shrank away in pain.

"Do you know that his fortune is nothing—a mere song compared with yours?"

"I have enough for both," with shining eyes.

"If you were poor instead of rich, would you hesitate?"

"Perhaps I might. I would not bring unhappiness on him for anything in the world."

Then he let her go, and presently slipped away unperceived.

Alone upstairs in his own room he paced up and down the crimson carpet, pursued by one absorbing thought that would not let him rest. Only three doors off down the corridor lay the man whom frail life stood between himself and happiness.

In all probability, after such an attack as had seized him that morning, he could not possibly last over a few months at most, but twelve hours would make all the difference—twelve short hours which must not be shortened by man, though they might be cut off by Heaven!

All his life he had thought of himself before others. If he had ever made an effort to rouse himself from his habitual indolence it was for his own sake and his own benefit that the novel energy was developed. The good things that had been lavished on him by his cousin were accepted with little gratitude. Guyon was rich, Vernon was poor. Fate had been unjust enough to make such a difference between them, and therefore it was man's natural duty to amend the injustice of Fate.

Cold, calculating, and unscrupulous, he was incapable of anything like true friendship. The passion that he felt for Muriel was due to her outward charms alone, and as unlike the pure ennobling love of Guyon Macdougall as an oil-lamp to the moon. He only loved her because she was good to look at; because her skin was soft as velvet, her hair like threads of gold, her figure perfect in its delicately rounded moulding. He thought nothing of her sweetness, purity, and truth. He knew that she could be steadfast to what she thought was right, because she had often playfully and firmly combated his will. He had seen that she was generous to the poor. He guessed that she would be charitable and forgiving, but for none of these virtues did he care for her one whit the more. He wished to have her for his wife simply because she was beautiful; whilst Macdougall loved her for her sweet, tender, womanliness as much as for the loveliness of her face.

Vernon Heathcote pressed his hand to his forehead; it burnt like fire. This morning that was about to dawn would rob him for ever of his dream, and never till this moment did he realise how sweet it was. He could not give it up; even now Heaven might be kinder to him than he thought. The new will might never be

signed. Mountguyon, even at that very moment, might be breathing his last.

A violent desire possessed him to see how the invalid really was. With swift yet stealthy steps he went down the long corridor towards the Earl's bedroom. The sound of the distant music jarred unpleasantly on his ears as he softly opened the door, and passing quickly in closed it behind him.

Walking forward on tiptoe he stood once more by the side of the sofa. Lord Mountguyon was lying just as he had left him, with his white hair resting on the velvet cushion, a tiger-skin and several other wraps thrown over his legs.

The silver lamp was turned down, and there was no light in the room except the firelight, which played every now and then on crimson curtains, gilded picture-frames, or the wasted features of the invalid, and flickered away into semi-darkness.

Heathcote's heart beat fast as he realised that he was alone, entirely alone with the man to whom he might owe everything or nothing. Stories of sudden ghastly deeds came into his head, committed in a moment of temptation like this, never thought of till the opportunity came, but carried out as easily as if they had been planned for years.

No wonder that a shiver ran through the daughter's frame, whilst this man was standing by her father's side alone in the darkened room.

Isolated by his own orders, Lord Mountguyon was completely at his mercy. Williams, his own confidential servant, had been forbidden to disturb him. The rest of the household were completely engaged with the festivities downstairs, and he was as much alone in his own bedroom as if he had been miles away from home, in some solitary house on the heath.

Heathcote stooped and peered into the sleeper's face. There were dark shadows round the closed eyes, the brows were slightly drawn as if in pain, the breath was laboured. Life seemed to hang upon a slender thread—the smallest accident might snap it—a slight stoppage of the breath, and life would be extinct.

Then there came across his mind a long list of oft-repeated kindnesses received from this man before him, from the days when he was strong and healthy as any other man till now, when a sudden unexpected disease had struck him down in the midst of the preparations for his daughter's ball.

Heathcote shook his head impatiently. "He was rich and I was poor. I would have done the same for him if it had been vice versa, and all will be cancelled to-morrow."

To-morrow! A small clock on the mantel-piece struck three. The morrow was three hours old, and yet he lived!

He clenched his hands till the nails ran into his palms as he frowned darkly at the unconscious sleeper. The blood seemed to surge up into his temples, and yet a dew, cold as ice, gathered on his brow. Slowly, as if drawn on against his will, he stretched out his hand and took hold of the cushion on which the Earl's head was resting. He could hear no sound but the beating of his heart, which seemed to thunder in his ears, as he pulled the corner of it forward with a stealthy, treacherous hand.

If Muriel had but yielded to her impulse, and bounded up the stairs, her father might have been saved. If Guyon Macdougall had been less fearful of intruding Vernon Heathcote might have been disturbed. But as it was, for fifteen long minutes he stood alone and unsuspected by the sofa—fifteen minutes which seemed to himself as many years—tine hundred seconds, which made all the difference between life and death.

When it was too late, hasty steps were heard in the corridor, and Guyon Macdougall entered the room to see somebody, he thought it was Heathcote, vanishing through the opposite door of the dressing-room, and to find the Earl's head resting on and not under the velvet cushion.

Something in the attitude of the head struck him as unnatural. He sprang forward with a suppressed cry. With a trembling hand he turned up the lamp and held it over the sofa.

The light fell full upon the Earl's face, and the

first glance told him that he was dead. That grey ashen look was never yet seen on the face of the living.

For a minute he stood still, absolutely stunned by the shock. Then he put down the lamp and passed his hand over his forehead. Only five minutes ago he was downstairs in the midst of all the joy, the excitement, the pleasure of life, and now, after that tiny interval, he stood in the presence of death.

"Oh, Heaven! My poor Muriel!"

A sob rose in his throat as he remembered Lord Mountguyon's kind words, which he had never thought would be the last he should ever hear from his lips, and kneeling down he kissed one of the cold hands reverently as a last farewell.

CHAPTER III.

"It was scarcely polite, I fear, to stop the music before all the people had gone," and Muriel watched with surprise the hasty exit of the musicians. "Was it you who told them to go?"

"I—I think it was Macdougall."

Vernon Heathcote's voice sounded hoarse, and his face was still so white that Muriel noticed it.

"You look tired out. Thank Heaven, it is all over!" looking round the empty room with a weary yawn. "I thought they were going to stay here for the night; but now that Lady Mornington has set the example the rest are following like a flock of sheep. Strange that so many dispense with the ceremony of saying good-bye."

"Do you know where Mr. Macdougall is?" she asked presently, after a pause, during which she had been pulling about the flowers in her bouquet. "He went up to see about papa, and I have been waiting for him for ages."

"I saw him a little while ago."

"Why, how cold you are; your teeth are chattering. For goodness sake go and warm yourself."

"It is cold."

And he shivered. Would he ever feel warm again, with the remembrance of that horror wrapping him round like a garment of ice!

"Don't you think I might slip away now! He has not come, so papa must be awake."

She was moving away, too anxious to wait for an answer, but he caught hold of her dress.

"For Heaven's sake stop!" he said, hoarsely.

She looked up at him in surprise. He had torn a lace frill to pieces in his earnestness.

"But why? You can make my excuses."

He breathed hard.

"Miss Forgethlynn and the others will think you so very rude."

"As if I cared for Netta! She will forgive me, I know. I must go. I believe you are keeping something from me!" she exclaimed, with a sudden fear, as she saw how constantly his eyes avoided hers.

"Nothing, upon my honour." His honour! Where was it! "Here's Macdougall to speak for himself," he added, in a tone of relief.

Macdougall came slowly up to them, with none of the embarrassment of a lover in his stern young face. Without speaking to Muriel, whose eyes were fastened upon him with a wondering stare, he drew Heathcote aside.

"You ought to tell her."

"I couldn't—not if I died for it," he said, emphatically.

And, without looking at either of them he disappeared into the hall, where a few of the guests who were going to stay over the night, and, consequently, had no carriages to take them away, were hovering in awe-struck silence over the fire.

Little Dr. Morton, who had been sent for out of the ball-room by Macdougall, had just come down from the Earl's room, and announced that his death was attributable to a sudden congestion of the vessels of the heart, which had produced suffocation.

This was the plain English of his verdict which he couched in far more scientific terms.

It was received as the truth by all who heard

it, and not a suspicion of treachery embittered the sorrow of Mountguyon's friends.

"What is it?"

And Muriel laid her trembling hand on Macdougall's arm.

"Come into the library," was his only answer; and with rapid strides he led her down the long lighted room, through the conservatory into the quiet and seclusion of the Earl's favourite study.

The fire was low, and, anxious to put off the dreadful moment as long as he could, he stopped to poke it before he spoke.

Muriel stood on the hearthrug, shaking from head to foot. As he turned towards her their eyes met. In an instant she guessed the truth.

"Tell me," she gasped, as chairs and tables, walls and ceiling, seemed to wave up and down in a confused mass.

He opened his arms, and caught her as she was about to fall. "Not dead! Oh, say he is not dead!" She looked up into his face with wild, imploring eyes.

Very tenderly he laid his hand upon her ruffled curls.

"My poor darling; you will meet in Heaven." "Oh, why did you not fetch me!" in an agony of reproach.

Fancy her father dying alone upstairs, whilst she was dancing in heartless merriment down below!

"Because I was too late."

"Oh, Heaven! I loved him so," with a pitiful, choking sob.

Tears of sympathy were running down his honest face as she cried her heart out on his breast. To be with her for ever, to comfort, cheer, protect, was the one hope of his life; and in solemn earnestness he dedicated his whole existence to her service.

Time passed on. The guests had been shown to their bedrooms, the house was perfectly quiet; the fire died out, the gray light of dawn peeped in through the chinks of the shutters. Guyon shivered with the cold.

There was a tap at the door, and Mrs. Ward, the present housekeeper and former nurse, an attached and faithful servant, came into the room bearing a tray. Half blinded by her tears, she made her way with difficulty to the table, and when she had set her burden down, looked up in surprise.

"I thought Mr. Heathcote was here." Even at that solemn moment her natural instincts of propriety suggested that it would be better that the eldest member of the family should be with her mistress than this young man who was unconnected by ties of blood.

Guyon shook his head as he gently released, unlocked his arms, and placed the exhausted girl on the sofa.

With a groan Muriel hid her face on the cushions.

"My poor lamb, drink this, and it will warm you," and Mrs. Ward, pouring out a steaming cup of coffee, laid her hand gently on her young mistress's shoulder; but it was shaken off. She turned to Macdougall, the tears running down her cheeks, "This'll be the death of her."

"Fetch her a cloak from somewhere, and I'll try—"

The housekeeper hurried away; and taking the cup in his hand, he knelt down by the sofa.

"You must drink this, dear," he said gently, but firmly; and obedient as a child, she turned her tear-stained face and put her lips to the coffee.

She was shaking with the cold when Mrs. Ward came back and threw a warm fur cloak over her shivering neck and shoulders.

"I must see him," with quivering lips.

"Not now; let me put you to bed at once, or you will catch your death of cold," entreated the housekeeper.

"No, I must see him first. Take me to him." Macdougall, without another word, drew her hand within his arm and led her out of the room, across the ghostly hall, up the broad staircase, where all sorts of horrors seemed to be lingering in the dark corners, down the long corridor which led to the Earl's apartments.

The awe of death was upon Macdougall as he

laid his hand upon the handle of the bedroom door and his fingers trembled.

"I will go in alone," she said, in a hoarse whisper.

He opened the door and stood aside.

"Shall I wait?"

She shook her head, and passed in.

Dazzled by the light of many wax tapers, she went forward falteringly.

The Rev. Cyprian Fleetwood, chaplain to the Earl, was kneeling by the bedside. He rose hastily.

"Heaven be with you," he said, solemnly, as he passed out of the room, leaving the daughter alone with her dead father.

There he lay, straight and cold and still, with his hands folded upon his breast, the peace of Heaven upon his calm brow, the peace of death in the heart which had beat so fast and painfully but a few short hours ago.

Muriel stretched her arms out with wild irrepresible longing. Oh, for the power to bring him back, if only for a minute, to tell him all the things she had left unsaid, to give him a few of the kisses which had been left ungiven, because he was always with her, and separation seemed impossible. Oh, to bring him back—the constant cry of those who are left behind.

With the joy-bells of Christmas ringing in her ears she sank down upon her knees, and cried to Heaven for the comfort she could not find on earth.

CHAPTER IV.

How did Vernon Heathcote pass the remainder of the night?

Cowering over a roaring fire in the billiard-room, listening to every crack in the furniture like a frightened child, longing to get away and hide himself from himself in the comfortable shelter of his bed, and yet lacking the courage to go upstairs, and face the long corridor alone.

Reduced to this miserable condition by a dastardly deed, which if known must surely bring him to the gallows, he did not dare to look the future in the face. Success was poisoned by the means which had ensured it. If Marchmont were his he could not bear to stay there; for no place on earth could be so loathsome to him as the one which constantly reminded him of his sin. If Muriel consented to be his, how could he ever meet the trusting glance of her beautiful eyes, with that hideous secret buried in the depths of his heart! It would stand as a ghost between them, dimming all the brightness, souring all the sweetness of life, till union might be infinitely worse than separation, and marriage as hateful a chain as that which bound the galley-slave to his oar.

Starting into the fire, he saw it all before him, sin and its certain consequence. He knew that his act of prudence, foresight, and unscrupulousness had done him more harm than all the careless follies of former years; and sitting there with shaken nerves, counting the cost as the slow hours went by, though all unmoved by penitence or remorse, he would have given up his hopes of Marchmont and all its fair inheritances—aye, and Muriel's love into the bargain—only to be as he was before, without this horror always by him, standing like an accusing conscience behind his chair.

A coal dropped out of the grate on to the tiles beneath; it startled him so that the hand which he stretched out to the decanter of brandy beside him, shook like a leaf in the wind. Cursing himself for his own cowardice, he drank off half a tumbler of brandy to strengthen his nerves, drew out his watch, and got up from his chair.

It was seven o'clock; in another minute the housemaids might be bustling about, and the whole house astir. His presence in the billiard-room might excite surprise, and in his present position the slightest cause for remark was to be avoided. He took up his candlestick, turned down the gas, and opened the door.

The hall looked vast and gloomy, with ghostly rays of the early winter day peeping through the shutters. The Christmas bells were still ringing as he went up the staircase, looking neither to

right nor left. Their sound gave him courage. It was pleasant to feel that there was somebody awake in the world besides himself. At the entrance of the corridor he hesitated. The bells stopped their joyous chime, and there was not a sound to be heard in all the grand old house but the thump-thump of his own frightened heart in his breast.

If he could only have gone to his room by any other way than past that door he would not have minded; but alone in the darkness, which seemed to close round him with the remembrance of that white face, which he had hushed to sleep so barbarously, ever with him, his spirit quailed.

With a muttered oath he stepped forward, angry at his own want of nerve. Suddenly the sound of a tolling bell rung out with mournful distinctness in the frosty air. One—two—three. Weird and solemn, each note like a warning voice, they tolled out the age of the dead. The joyous chimes at the birth of the Saviour had been stopped for the passing bell, which announced a mortal's death.

With that sound in his ears Heathcote made his way down the corridor. He had passed the Earl's door when it slowly opened. Looking round fearfully over his shoulder he saw a white figure standing on the threshold. His heart stood still—his knees knocked together, a cold dew broke out on his forehead.

"Good Heaven, was he mad, or was there any truth in the old wife's fable of a ghost!" Not caring to test the truth of the theory he made his way to his own room as fast as he could, and only breathed freely when he had shut the door behind him.

His fire was out; and cold, wretched, despairing himself, and suspicious of everyone else he got as quickly as possible into bed; but sleep refused to have anything to do with him. Afraid of the darkness, for the first time in his life, he kept the lighted candle by his side, and only blew it out when he heard one of the footmen coming in with his hot-water.

When the shutters were open, the curtains drawn aside, and the cold daylight streamed into the room, freed from his fears of the supernatural, he turned over and went to sleep.

The ghost was Lady Muriel Heathcote, as heart-sick and utterly exhausted, after her long vigil by her father's side, she was stealing softly in her shimmering ball dress to the shelter of her room. Mrs. Ward had sent Pierce, the maid, to bed, and was sitting fast asleep in the armchair, when her young mistress came in.

She woke with a start, and rubbing her eyes energetically insisted upon performing all the duties of a maid.

It was many years since she had waited upon anyone; but she brushed out the shining hair as deftly as ever, put away the dress, folded up the dainty clothing, and then sat down by the bedside, saying, "that she would dearly like to stay there for the sake of company," because her kindly heart went out towards the lonely child, who had neither mother, brother, nor sister to comfort her in her great sorrow.

There is no use in lingering over the harrowing details, which are painful in real life, and unpleasant when retailed secondhand.

Mr. Dormer arrived the next day, and was much shocked to find that his illustrious client was dead; and that instead of drawing up a second will he would have to produce the first. He asked who was the last person to see Lord Mountguyon alive.

To which Guyon Macdougall promptly responded,—

"Mr. Heathcote."

"You are mistaken," said Vernon quietly, knocking the ashes off his cigar.

The lawyer bent forward, but said nothing.

"You mean to say that he was dead when you first went into the room?" and Macdougall looked him straight in the face.

"Nothing of the kind. My poor cousin was alive and unusually animated when I was with him."

He stooped forward, and poked the fire as if to change the subject.

"And yet surely I saw you leave the room as I came in!" Guyon persisted.

"On the contrary, I came in as you and Lady Muriel left. It was then that poor Mountguyon talked to me so pleasantly about old times."

"Ah, but the second time?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I came up to find him dead."

"I know nothing of that—confound this cigar, it won't draw;" and he threw it into the fire.

"Do you mean to say that you never went near him again?" fixing his honest eyes on the pale face just opposite to him. "I could have sworn that it was you who went out by the dressing-room door."

"Lucky that you didn't." But with all his restraint Vernon Heathcote could not prevent himself from turning a shade paler. "If you want confirmation of the fact you may ask Lady Muriel, and she would tell you that at the moment you went upstairs I took Lady Mornington to her carriage. You must have mistaken Williams for me."

"I met Williams at the foot of the stairs," said Macdougall shortly. "He was very much vexed because you had told him on no account to disturb his master."

"Yes; that was Mountguyon's own message; but I thought he had disobeyed it. Perhaps it was Foulger, the butler?"

"No, it was not Foulger."

"Then in the devil's name, who do you think it was?"

"You; I told you so before!" and he looked straight and fearlessly into the other man's shifting eyes.

"If this were my house instead of Muriel's, by heavens, I'd kick you out!"

And starting to his feet he glared ferociously at Macdougall, and looked as if he would like to seize him by the throat.

"Try," said Guyon, composedly; at the same time drawing himself up to his full height, and squaring his shoulders.

"Gentlemen, for Heaven's sake, don't quarrel," and Mr. Dormer, a small man, with the dauntless spirit of "the tiny," thrust himself between them. "Remember that you are in the house of mourning, and don't desecrate it by unseemly quarrels."

"I am not accustomed to having my word doubted," said Heathcote, hoarsely.

"Mr. Macdougall meant nothing of the kind, I am sure; he only meant to credit you with a lapse of memory. Can you tell me what day is likely to be fixed for the funeral?"

"I don't know, somewhere about Thursday, I suppose."

"If I am to look over the Earl's papers, perhaps I had better begin at once. Will you give them to me in the library?"

"Certainly; perhaps Mr. Macdougall thinks that I went into my cousin's room in order to make away with his will."

"I don't know why you should say so," said Guyon, haughtily.

"The only will the Earl ever made," interposed the lawyer with a sigh, "is safely housed in my chambers in Lincoln's Inn."

Then he followed Heathcote out of the room.

"What do you suspect him of?" he asked later on, when he found himself alone with Macdougall in the lesser drawing-room before dinner.

"Nothing. Only when he swears that he never went into the room a second time I know he lies; and I don't mind telling him so."

"Very imprudent of you. Do you know that you have made him your enemy for life?"

"I don't care a hang if I have."

"An enemy is an *article de luxe* which a rising man had better be without."

"I am not afraid. If he gets in my way I'll kick him out of it."

"Not so easy, my young friend, where the money and the influence are all one side."

"Ah, but the money won't be."

"How do you know?" quickly. "Wait till Thursday."

The next day Mr. Dormer and Macdougall went up to town, promising to return for the funeral.

Guyon had waited on as long as he dared in the

hope of seeing Muriel, but she was in bed with a feverish cold, and little Dr. Morton was the only man allowed to penetrate into her suite of apartments.

Miss Netta Forgethlynn volunteered to stay behind and nurse her; but her mother refused to let her remain alone in a house where the mistress was young, and the temporary master an unmarried man; so, much against her will, she was obliged to pack up her trunks and join her mother.

To those who watched the pair with unfavourable eyes it might have seemed as if mother and daughter had come for the express purpose of taking care of the new Earl rather than of his cousin; but that might have been simply because he had a horror of being alone, and she was equally anxious to be left to herself.

Macdougall's departure was a great blow to Miss Forgethlynn; but during his absence, with a pretty air of subdued melancholy, she kept her hand in by practising on her host.

She thought she had made a conquest, because he seemed so anxious always to have her with him; little dreaming of the hideous reason which lay at the foundation of his dislike for solitude.

On the day of the funeral the mourning coaches were followed by forty private carriages and a long train of sorrowing tenants; but she, whose sorrow was greater than all the rest, was unable to pay the last respect to the memory of the deceased, for she was lying between life and death behind the closed shutters of the west wing.

A large company assembled in the library to hear the will, which was read out by Mr. Dormer.

Guyon Macdougall's thoughts wandered from the dry legal sentences to that night a week ago, when Muriel's soft brown head rested on his breast, and overpowering grief for the dead was sweetened by love for the living.

There was a general look of surprise when the solicitor came to a stop.

"Is that all?" inquired Lord Mornington, who, being the oldest friend of the family, and personally uninterested in the property of the deceased, felt justified in asking the question.

"Yes, all," rejoined Mr. Dormer. "Mr. Vernon Heathcote, or rather, I beg his pardon, the present Earl of Mountguyon, is the sole legatee. This will, as you perceive, was drawn up before the late Earl's marriage was contracted."

"And the poor girl has nothing? It is monstrous!"

"I never heard such a thing in my life!" exclaimed Dr. Morton. "Except that bequest to Mr. Macdougall, every one else is forgotten."

"To me!" and Guyon woke up from his dreams.

"Yes, where were your ears? You come in—as favourite godson—to five thousand pounds."

"And Lady Muriel has nothing?"

"Not a penny. She is worse off than my own girls will be at my death. I never thought badly of his lordship before."

"Don't be too hard on him," said Mr. Dormer, looking up from the papers which he was tying up with pink tape. "If he had lived but twelve hours longer Lady Muriel would have had her rights. He sent for me, poor fellow, on purpose to draw up a second will, and I came down the next day with the draft of it in my pocket."

Macdougall started to his feet.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing, only now I know," in a very low voice.

"There is one thing which I wish to state before you all disperse," and the new Earl turned his pale face towards the excited group, as he leaned one arm on the mantelpiece. "My cousin, Lady Muriel Heathcote, will not be defrauded of her rights, simply because her poor father had not time to secure them. Mountguyon is mine, because it goes with the title, but of all his private fortune invested in the funds I shall only take sufficient to enable me to keep up the title with becoming dignity. The rest, with Marchmont Towers, and the house in Grosvenor-square will be his daughter's."

There was a murmur of applause as he concluded. Turning to Lord Mornington, he said—

"Luncheon is ready, and I will join you in the dining-room when I have inquired after my

cousin's health," and then hurried from the room.

"Do you think she will take it?"

"Yes, Mr. Dormer," answered the peer, with a smile. "I think she will take it, and himself as well."

"That would be a satisfactory end to a bad business. After all she might have done worse."

"Yes, and it does the fellow some credit to settle it all in his own mind without the slightest preparation."

CHAPTER V.

GUYON MACDOUGALL strolled into the conservatory disconsolately.

To do him justice, the news that Muriel was a beggar was a relief to him rather than not; for he had thoroughly disliked the thought of owing everything to his wife.

But if she accepted a fortune from a man whom he hated and mistrusted it would be almost an impossibility to consent to share it with her.

"Why so moody?" said a soft voice close to his ear, and looking round he found Netta Forgethlynn standing by his side, looking very pretty in her complimentary mourning.

"A man can't be always laughing."

"No, but he ought never to look cross when a woman speaks to him."

"I couldn't be cross to you; but I feel as if I should like to bite somebody."

"Do it if you like," and she put a soft cheek provokingly near his brown moustaches.

He stooped his head of course, though not at all in a humour for flirtation; but she slipped away just in time, and placed herself at a safe distance, blushing most becomingly as she shook her saucy head at him.

"I said 'a bite.'"

"How do you know that I wasn't going to do it?"

"Your eyes weren't fierce enough. Do you know, Mr. Macdougall, I am very good to speak to you."

"Of course you are; but why?"

"After the manner in which you treated me the other night!"

"I!" looking quite mystified. "Why, I had nothing to do with you at all."

"Exactly. And do you call that flattering?" with a pretty pout.

"You were too much occupied to want me."

"I am the best judge of that."

"A woman can never be a judge at all—she is too prejudiced."

"Too prejudiced sometimes, I'll allow," very softly, and with an upward glance from under her dark lashes.

"But, Netta, dear," drawing very close to her, "you were always kind to me."

"Too kind, I think," blushing and shy.

"Will you give Muriel a little note from me, and ask her when I shall have a chance of seeing her?"

The girl's face clouded.

"You can't see her—she's in bed."

"I know she is; but to-morrow, perhaps, she will be moved on to the sofa."

"And then Lord Mountguyon will have to see her."

"That is no reason why I should be kept out."

"Every reason, I should think, if I were he."

"What do you mean?" his colour rising angrily.

"If I intended to marry her I should keep all admirers at a distance."

"When once she is mine I shan't be in the least afraid," throwing back his head.

"I was not talking of you."

"Of whom then?"

"Lord Mountguyon, of course. To accept a fortune might be a bitter pill; but to accept a fortune out of your bridegroom's hand would be the most natural thing possible."

"Unfortunately, I have no fortune to offer her."

"No, so you must make room for the one who

has," coolly, as she munched a piece of yellow jasmine.

"I take my oath I won't."

"Ah, you men—you are all alike. You say you love us, but it is yourselves all the while."

"Heaven knows I love Muriel."

"You think so, and yet you would reduce her to beggary. Do you imagine that she could be happy in a little house after such a place as this?"

"I think she is fonder of me than of her furniture," he answered with a smile.

"Think of the associations connected with every stone or blade of grass about the place, and ask her to give it up if you can. I know that it would break her heart to leave it."

"I shall not ask her, but I know what she will choose."

"And so do I. She would not have a grain of sense if she didn't."

"We shall see," and he set his teeth sternly.

"Yes, but it is you I'm thinking of," with a sudden change of tone. "Would you have any happiness if you knew you had spoilt her life? Fancy how all her relations would cry out against you as the man who prevented her from being mistress of her own home, who dragged her down from a coronet and wealth to a position of comparative insignificance!"

"Let them shout if they like. We can easily stop our ears."

"No, you couldn't; you are too unselfish to wish evil to come to her for your sake. Evil! Because when she sees another take the place which she ought to fill she will be tortured by the thought of what might have been. Oh, Guyon, it is for your sake I say all this," and she looked up into his stern face with genuine tears in her eyes, "it is to save you from life-long misery that I wish for your hatred."

"You are very good."

"Do not say that in that nasty, spiteful way," and she burst into tears. "Say you hate me at once."

"I can't," with a smile, as he put his arm gently round her.

"You hate me," with a sob, "you know you do."

"I know I don't," and then, as her face was resting so confidently on his coat he bent his head, and kissed her flushed cheek softly.

"Shall you ever forgive me?" in a whisper.

"There is nothing to forgive."

"You liked me once—at least you said you did."

"I like you still—awfully."

"And I like you—rather," drawing herself away, but still looking up into his handsome face with eyes that sparkled through her tears. "Oh, if I ever learnt to love I should do it with all my heart and soul, and everything about me; and I would follow him if I had not a shoe to my feet, or a farthing in my pocket, asking nothing but to be with him, and to have my hand clasped in his."

"And what a happy 'he' the future man will be," looking down with admiration on her glowing beauty.

"Give me the note for Muriel, quick," she said, with a sigh.

"I haven't written it."

"Then do so at once."

"By-the-bye, luncheon is ready."

"And I am dying of hunger. Suppose we come."

"I don't feel as if I could sit down to table with that man."

"Why not? I have found him very pleasant. Why do you hate him?"

"I mistrust him. He has told me a lie, and I can't get over that."

"What lie?" raising her head quickly.

"Please, m'm, his lordship told me to tell you that luncheon was served."

The footman, who had entered unperceived, held open the door for her, and Netta Forgethlynn passed out, expecting Macdougall to follow; but he turned in the opposite direction, and threw himself down in a chair in the library.

Here he sat for some time lost in thought. The old forgotten will, by which Vernon Heath-

cote became possessed of Muriel's fortune, seemed to rise up in witness against him. Lord Mountguyon's sudden death had saved him from the pitiable position of a poverty-stricken peer. The lie which he had told to screen himself from suspicion proved that there was just reason for mistrust, but unless mistrust could grow into something more definite, he must go on his way rejoicing, honoured and respected by those of his own circle, in undisturbed enjoyment of the fruits of his crime.

Dr. Morton persisted that heart disease, and heart disease alone, was the cause of the Earl's death, and the peculiar discolouration of the face he accounted for by such a scientific explanation as utterly mystified his auditors.

Guyon Macdougall could do nothing but wait and watch. If he lifted up his voice against the Earl, all men would cry shame on him, and say he was disappointed because the heiress would be a penniless bride. The squire of the neighbourhood had known Vernon from a boy, and would be loth to believe anything seriously against him. The prestige of his title would help to screen him from reproach, and with a shudder of disgust Guyon resolved to let him be, and gladly turned his thoughts to his betrothed.

He had felt utterly miserable when Netta was talking to him, but here alone in the library, with no crafty suggestions whispered in his ear, his confidence returned, and taking up a pen he wrote a letter telling Muriel the truth—that he was thankful to think that she had lost her fortune, in order that she might owe everything to his love. He besought her to let him see her before he was obliged to leave England, offering to run down from London any day that she could possibly give him an interview; and he concluded with words of tenderness from the bottom of his honest heart, which would have brought glad tears to her beautiful eyes if she had ever been allowed to read them.

When he had finished it, and kissed the address with lover-like fervour and folly, he thought he would find out Mrs. Ward and entrust it to her charge; but, unfortunately, as he crossed the hall Miss Netta Forgethly, who seemed ever on the alert, took it from his hand and tripped upstairs with it, promising to let him know if there were any answer.

For hour after hour he hung about the sitting-rooms waiting for a message. He was longing to be off, but it was impossible to go till he had heard from Muriel.

All the rest of her visitors had departed; even Lord Mountguyon had driven away, saying to Mr. Dornor, who accompanied him to the station,

"I regard this place as belonging to Lady Muriel, and, therefore, am anxious not to intrude upon her privacy longer than I can help."

The solicitor thought he had misjudged the man after all; for no one could seem more bent on doing what was right and just.

Guyon, lonely and impatient, was kicking his heels in the gallery, when a light step came through the twilight shadows towards him.

"Well!" he said, eagerly.

Netta smiled provokingly. "What are you waiting for?"

"A letter. For Heaven's sake, don't trifle with me."

"My poor fellow, did you really think that Muriel would busy herself with pen, ink and paper in her bed?"

"She might; but she sent me a message!"

"Not exactly."

"I wish you would be quick," hoarsely.

"You are so terribly in earnest you frighten me."

He put his hand upon her arm and held it tight.

"Did Muriel say when she would see me?"

She looked away from his eager eyes down the darkening gallery.

"As if she could, when Lord Mountguyon himself is not to see her till next week."

"Mountguyon," contemptuously. "I suppose she would see me before him."

"Then you suppose wrong. Oh, Guyon, don't look like that," she cried, with a little frightened gasp, as she caught him by the hand. "You

know it would be so much wiser for her to marry him."

"Let her tell me so, then, with her own lips," he said sternly. "I shan't believe it till then."

"She is so utterly wretched, don't be hard upon her."

"Hard upon her! Good heavens, is there anything on earth I would not do to give her one moment's pleasure?"

"Then go away quietly; that would please her best."

There was a pause, whilst he stood still, with throbbing heart and dying hopes, trying to restrain himself to outward calm.

"Netta," he said, huskily but very gravely, "you and I have always been good friends. I don't think you would deceive me. Swear to me, by all your hopes of salvation, that Muriel really wants to get rid of me, and I will go."

She drooped her head, shaking as if with sudden cold.

"She has always been so rich, poverty frightens her."

"Pshaw! it is not that! Does she think I couldn't make her happy?"

"Yes," in the lowest of whispers.

"Swear it," he said, imperatively.

"I swear it."

Then, before she knew it, he had caught his hand from her nervous grasp, and was striding down the gallery with his head in the air.

"Guyon, stop!" she cried, running after him.

"Are you going without a word?"

A ray of light from a window in the roof fell across his face. It was stern as death, and almost as grey.

"Did I forget to say good-bye?" he asked, with a joyless smile.

She threw herself against the railings, sobbing passionately.

"What are you crying for? Because I have been a fool?"

"Because—because you will hate me," she panted.

He put his hand softly on her dark head.

"It is not your fault, poor child. I think you would have helped me if you could."

Then he hurried down the broad staircase, crossed the hall, put on his coat, caught up his hat, and walked out of Marchmont Towers, probably for the last time in his life.

As the front door slammed behind him Netta dried her eyes. Remorse was busy in her heart; but the more she saw of Guyon Macdougall the more devotedly she loved him, and the more impossible it seemed to give him up to any one else.

Muriel looked up into her face with anxious eyes as she bent in affectionate solicitude over the invalid.

"Didn't he send a message?"

"Yes, dear—his sincerest sympathy."

"Was that all?" in keen disappointment.

"He hoped you would take the greatest care of yourself. Poor fellow! he seemed terribly cut up, for your sake, of course, by the loss of your fortune."

"I thought he wouldn't care."

"Trust a man always to think of pounds, shillings, and pence; but then, of course, he made up his mind that it would all be the same for you in the end; and he said he should always think of you as he went on his lonely way."

"I don't understand," lifting her weary head from the pillow.

"No dear; you are too tired. Let me read you to sleep."

And, taking up a book of sermons, Miss Forgethly seated herself in a comfortable chair by the bedside.

It often takes a great deal of trouble, and thought, and harrowing anxiety to bring two loving hearts together; but a little thing will part them. A message not delivered, a letter never given, and the rift becomes a gulf, which is rarely bridged till death takes the bandage from eyes that would have seen so gladly, and the truth is known when mortal love is dying.

Muriel, with every energy stunned by the death of her father, had no chance against the machinations of her subtle foe; but still she

refused to believe that Guyon wished to give her up because she was penniless.

She thought perhaps he was afraid to ask her to share his comparative poverty, or that some of her officious friends had told him that it was his duty to release her. Anyhow, for the present she could do nothing; she must let it be, and trust to their next meeting to set everything right.

She little guessed that Lord Mountguyon was moving heaven and earth to get Macdougall appointed to a distant post, and that his efforts were about to be crowned with success.

CHAPTER VI.

MURIEL was lying on a sofa in her dressing-room. White and wan and weary, with dark circles round her eyes, a look of great weakness in the listless pose of her small head upon the pillow, an utter want of energy in the drooping lines of her graceful figure.

An Indian shawl was thrown over her feet, and the dark crimson contrasted well with the delicacy of her colouring.

"You wished to see me?"

The sweet low tones sent the blood surging up to Mountguyon's temples, as he bent over her hand with many inquiries after her health.

"Yes, I wanted to see you. Can't you guess what it has been to me to be without the sight of your face during the last fortnight?"

"I daresay there were many things you wanted to settle and explain," coldly, as if she wished to keep the conversation to entirely business topics.

"You are right," discreetly hiding his mortification; "but before everything else, I wish you clearly to understand that your father's will shall make no difference to you. I can guess what his intentions were, and I mean to carry them out to the letter."

A soft pink stole up the whiteness of her cheeks, her eyes opened wide, as if in disgust or surprise, but she said nothing.

"You will continue to live on at The Towers just in the same way as ever, with fifteen thousand a year, if you think that sufficient to keep it up. The house in town shall be yours also, so that you need not be condemned to a retired life in the country."

"You are very good," she raised her head, and her delicate nostrils quivered with scorn.

"Do you think that I would accept as charity that which ought to belong to me by right? Do you know I would rather starve!"

"Charity! And that from me to you!"

Stung to the quick he bit his moustaches savagely.

"Yes, charity. It would come as a gift from you, and that I could not possibly accept."

"Why not? I am the nearest relation you possess. We are drawn close together by ties of blood—"

"We are only cousins."

"As yet, but if you will only listen to me," he bent forward, and tried to take her hand, "we may be something more. Muriel, you think it beneath you to take a gift from a cousin; is surely would be no dishonour to accept it from a husband."

She looked up into his face in utter bewilderment. "It does not belong to Mr. Macdougall!"

"Macdougall!" He forced out the word, as if it had been the name of some vermin. "No, nor ever likely to—thank Heaven. Do you know that he is by this time on his way to Washington, thanking his stars that he had not taken the final plunge, and engaged himself to a penniless girl instead of an heiress. Don't look as if you thought I was telling you a lie. Has he not fought shy of the place ever since the day he came to listen to the will?"

"He knew that I was ill, and could not see him."

"And so did I, but I besieged the servants with my inquiries; I could not rest until you had granted me an interview. But don't let us waste the time in talking of the past; think of

the future. They have told you to look forward to poverty and neglect; but I tell you that you shall be richer, happier, more loved than ever you were before. Muriel, you must listen to me. You know that every thought and wish of my heart is devoted to you!"

"Don't talk of it, please," beseechingly. "But I must. Would it not be pleasant to you to be mistress of your own home; to wear the title borne in former years by your own mother—to shine as a star amongst the leaders of fashion in London?"

"Hush! it can never be."

"But it must. Those who love you best think it would be for your happiness. They cannot bear to think of you with a dismal future before you," watching her face intently, "pinched in means, living in obscurity, forgotten by the world at large—unable to take the position to which the name entitles you."

"If you knew how little I cared," closing her eyes with an air of utter weariness.

"But I care," very tenderly.

"If I don't. What does it matter?"

"You are too tired to talk any longer," rising from his seat; "but when may I come back for my answer?"

"You have it now."

"No, I won't take it. You are crushed by sorrow, and incapable of realising your position."

"If you asked me a thousand times it would be the same."

"And yet," with a smile, "I must ask you again, and I trust to better luck."

"Please don't. I thank you very much, but," the colour rushing into her cheeks, "I should hate my home if it were not really mine, but yours."

"That is folly. You will live here, of course, and I shall only come when you are good enough to invite me."

"Good-bye. Remember, I am certain not to change my mind."

"Like all women," with a shrug of his shoulders, as he attempted to lift her hand to his lips.

She drew it away with a shudder, which brought a frown to his brow.

"She must be mine," he said to himself, as he went down the corridor with hasty steps. "Her pride will be my best friend after all, for she will not like to stay here unless she is my wife, and it is impossible for her to go away."

So impossible that when he ran down from town three weeks later, after waiting in vain for an invitation, he found that Lady Muriel Heathcote had left The Towers just four days before, and nobody but Mrs. Ward, who accompanied her, knew where she was going.

He was stunned, bewildered, and utterly taken aback.

Was it for this he had planned and schemed—for this that he had sent Guyon Macdougall out to America—for this that he had sold his soul to perdition?

Foulger, thinking he was ill, went and fetched him a glass of wine, but he pushed it angrily away.

"And when did Lady Muriel talk of returning?"

"Well, you see, my lord, we took it into our head that she was gone for good. She took a solemn leave of us all, with the tears running down her cheeks. And as she said as how we had all been faithful servants to my lord that's gone, and she would have dearly liked to keep us on; but as to that she must refer us to your lordship."

"Absurd. Of course everything will go on just as usual until she returns."

"Shall I tell Mrs. Simpson to prepare dinner in the west dining-room?"

"No. I shall go back to town at once."

And back to London he went, unwilling to pass an hour longer than was necessary in the beautiful place which he had acquired by a crime.

On his arrival in London he drove straight to Mr. Dormer's chambers, and asked for Lady Muriel Heathcote's address.

The solicitor said he was very sorry, but he must decline to give it, as Lady Muriel had issued stringent orders to that effect.

Lord Mountguyon insisted with calm dignity, but Mr. Dormer was not in the least overawed by his airs, and firmly refused to betray a lady's confidence.

Finding that remonstrances and commands were equally unavailing, the Earl went home in an unenviable frame of mind, determined not to be hauled by a girl's caprice.

To return to Guyon Macdougall. Three days after Lord Mountguyon's interview with Muriel, the young attack, in a paroxysm of despair at being ordered off to Washington, rushed down to The Towers, resolved to learn the truth from her own lips.

Thinking over the matter in the privacy of his own lodgings, he came to the conclusion that it was utterly beyond the bounds of possibility for Muriel to change, as Miss Forgethlynn pretended she had done, and therefore it behoved him to make another attempt before taking his congé as final.

On a fine frosty afternoon he was walking across the park on the way to The Towers, when he met Netta, in the act of starting out for a constitutional with her skates in her hand. After a sufficiently cordial greeting he said that he would not interrupt her walk, but would go on to The Towers by himself.

To this she objected so strongly that he was obliged to accept her company whether he would or no.

She was looking very pretty, in a black hat smothered in feathers, with an eager flush on her cheeks, a bright gleam in her eyes. Her blood was bounding in her veins at the mere delight of walking once more by his side, and her voice shook with a pleasurable thrill, as she answered his many questions.

"Not so well! Are you sure that she takes sufficient care of herself?"

"Perhaps not, but I do it for her," laughing up into his earnest face. "Oh, Guyon, how naughty it is of you to come again! She will be so angry."

"I could not keep away. Do you know that I start for Washington next Saturday?"

"Washington!" She stopped short, all the colour gone out of her cheeks.

"Yes, it isn't quite the other end of the earth, but it seems almost as bad. Tell her that it is a long good-bye, and surely she will see me then."

"Come in this way," she said, opening the library window, because she was afraid of going through the hall lest they should meet some of the servants who might betray his advent. "Stay here, whilst I go and see what I can do for you."

To Guyon it seemed hours before she returned, but in reality it was only a few minutes.

"So unfortunate," she said, as she came in, shrugging her pretty shoulders.

"You can't mean it!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "She must see me, if only because it is the last time."

"Impossible! Her cough came on so badly whilst I was out that she was obliged to go to bed."

"Never mind! Perhaps she will get up, or perhaps—"

"She sends you her best remembrances, and wishes you bon voyage."

His face fell, and his heart leapt to see the change in it. "Is that all?"

"What more did you expect? Only three days ago Lord Mountguyon was here," she added, significantly.

"And did he see her?" eagerly.

"Of course he did, for ever so long."

"You don't mean," speaking very slowly; "that anything was settled?"

"I don't know for certain; but she is to stay on here for the present. My mother and I will be obliged to leave her next week, and after that I suppose she must have a regular chaperone. Anyhow, it will be awkward for her to stay on in Lord Mountguyon's house unless she makes up her mind to take him as well."

No answer.

"What are you taking up your hat for? Can't you care to talk to me?"

"No," he said, very gravely. "I've had my lesson. Never again will I care or any other

woman, so help me Heaven!" and he walked quickly towards the window.

She caught hold of his coat-sleeve and tried to draw him back. The room was very dark, so that he could not see the blushes on her cheeks, as she lifted her face pleadingly to his. "Not if she loved you better than her life!" she asked, in the softest whisper.

He looked down at her in surprise, as a scalding tear dropped on his hand. Sudden comprehension came to him through that tiny drop of water, and his handsome face grew very pitiful, as he met her beseeching eyes. With a chivalrous wish to be blind to the confession of her tearful cheeks, he turned away his head. "Even if she thought so, I should know that she would change. Good-bye."

He was gone, and she flung herself face downwards on the sofa. All her heartless lies and deceptions had been in vain. She had lowered herself to the lowest level of the meanest worm for nothing. In spite of seeming scorn and dismissal would still belong to the girl upstairs, who was crying out for him in her sleep only the night before. But they should never know it—no, never! She would stay at The Towers, ready to intercept any letters that might pass between them; and when Guyon was safely on the way to America she would return to London, and see if she could not satisfy her ambition as her love was doomed to disappointment.

Netta Forgethlynn was not a woman to pine. She had risked so much for the sake of her passion that she was reckless. If she could not have the man she loved she would win a coronet and startle the world of fashion by the splendour and the variety of her caprices. She had been almost as cruel in her way as Vernon Heathcote in his.

Muriel Heathcote was entirely at her mercy, when she entreated her to write a letter to her lover, because she was too weak to do it for herself. It was to tell him that she had no fear of poverty, but the only thing she dreaded was to be under an obligation to a man whom she had learnt to dislike, therefore he was to listen to no reports as to her accepting Marchmont Towers from her cousin.

When the letter was penned it ran in quite a different strain, and with its hints at future possibilities of wealth goaded Macdougall to despair.

Standing on the deck of the *Alaska*, watching the moonlight on the broad waves of the Atlantic, he cursed the day that had seen him born, and the foolish, boyish faith which had induced him to trust a woman; whilst she, who loved him still in spite of everything, watched the night go by in sleepless unrest, and wondered why he had never been, even to bid good-bye.

CHAPTER VII.

"DEAR, dear me. I wish you wouldn't be for ever stitching at that blessed frock," exclaimed Mrs. Ward, as over-tired with her duties as "a letter-out of lodgings" to single gentlemen, she sat down in a chair and puffed. "I know you will spoil your eyes, my lady, and there isn't another pair like them in London."

"You dear old thing, don't fuss yourself about me," exclaimed Muriel, brightly, as after threading her needle afresh she began to hem the bottom of a small garment for the poor. "Constant employment keeps me happy; and never call me 'my lady' again, it sounds too ridiculous under present circumstances. I thought I had quite cured you."

"I am sure I do beg your pardon, but it slipped out quite unintentional. Do you know that Mr. Henderson—the gentleman on the first-floor you know—had the impudence to ask if he mightn't come in this evening and listen to your piano, because you did play so magnificently?"

"I thought they were all out when I was playing last night," and her delicate cheek coloured with vexation. "He has never seen me, I hope."

"Not he, or he would have spoken about you

instead of the music. Mr. Guy said he would be in to tea, so I suppose I had better see if Emily has got the kettle to boil. I wish they would all stay out, and all come in together," she mumbled, rising from her chair.

"That is rather too much to expect. It would be very convenient if lodgers could be made to set by machinery; and then I could always keep them at a safe distance when I wanted to take my walks abroad."

"But they never have annoyed you, I hope. Not one of them should stay in the house if it came to that."

"Don't be alarmed, nothing has happened, only I get rather tired of waiting sometimes. I wonder which is the popular colour—blue or red! For I've made four red frocks and three blue."

"Red, I think; because it reminds them of the military, and there never was such a talk about them as there is just now. I will be back in a minute, for I'm sure you must be dying for a cup of tea."

As the *et devant* housekeeper left the room Muriel let her work drop in her lap with a heavy sigh.

For nearly a year and a half she had been living in a quiet street not far from Hanoversquare with her old nurse.

She had enough to live on from the sale of a small estate which had been her mother's property.

Consequently she was no burden, "only a joy for ever," to the faithful servant, and under her roof she was glad to hide her head in the first bewilderment of her sorrow.

Afraid of being pursued by her cousin she kept her address a secret from every one but Mr. Dormer, and lived on in quiet loneliness, very busy in constant works for the poor, who regarded her as the guardian angel of their degraded homes.

It seemed as if these works of charity could alone fill the aching void in her heart.

She never complained, but often wetted her pillow with bitter but unavailing tears.

It was so hard to be deprived of father and lover all at once.

The first was gone to the silent land, from which none may ever return; but surely the other would come back to her with the smile she remembered so well on his honest face, the love-light in his eyes.

A year and a half of waiting, and he had not come.

During all that time her only relaxations had been found in the piano or book, or very occasionally in the bosom of Mr. Dormer's quiet family, and yet she never complained.

She always met Mrs. Ward's kindly glance with an answering smile, and never owned to being bored or unhappy, or turned her pretty little nose up at her humble surroundings.

Once Lord Mountguyon caught sight of her in the streets and followed her home.

A passionate scene ensued, but she never wavered.

A feeling of loathing and disgust came over her as he besought her to marry him, whether she loved him or not.

He seemed half crazed with passion as he threw himself down on his knees beside the sofa on which she was sitting.

"Come to me," he implored, his eyes glittering, his breast heaving. "You don't know what you are doing—you will drive me mad."

"Go!" she cried, breathlessly, as he tried to kiss her. "It would drive me mad to live with you. I hate you!"

Then he rose to his feet, white to the very lips.

"Enough!" he said, gloomily. "I shall never trouble you again; but go back at least to Marchmont. I cannot rest—with a shudder—'whilst you are in a hole like this.'"

"This lodging is mine, because I pay for it, therefore I prefer it to any house of yours."

"You are needlessly cruel to yourself as well as to me. What have I done?" he corrected himself, rapidly. "What do you know against me to hate me like this?"

(Continued on page 116.)

STEPCHILDREN OF FORTUNE.

—302—

CHAPTER XVII.

JAMES STUART recovered; to the intense surprise of his lodger and the deep thankfulness of his children, there came a day when he was brought down stairs and laid on the big old-fashioned sofa in the parlour.

They made a sort of festival of that first coming downstairs. Jack was away, that mysterious mode of earning money, which none of his relations could fathom, always took him away for the middle of the day; but Elizabeth and Aunt Mary had prepared such an afternoon tea as had not been seen in Church-street for many a month.

Etta looked prettier than ever, and was all smiles and good humour, while Lancelot Underwood, who had come to be regarded quite as an old friend through his kindness in that time of sickness, came in just as all was ready with a big bunch of late summer flowers, whose fragrance filled the big homely room, and brought a flickering smile to the blind man's face.

Aunt Mary shook her head disapprovingly even while she arranged the blossoms in a quaint china bowl.

"You'll come to want, young man," she said, reproachfully, though her eyes had a grateful brightness while she spoke; "you're far too extravagant. Fancy people in Ashley Green wasting money on flowers!"

"It is just people in Ashley Green who ought to buy flowers," retorted Lance, "seeing very few houses have a scrap of garden big enough to grow any in. Mr. Stuart, how do you feel this afternoon? has the exertion of coming down tired you too much?"

"I'm better," said the blind man, cheerfully, "pounds better, sir; I don't think I could have died, Mr. Underwood, and left my boy's name under a cloud. I'd fain struggle on till Jack's cleared, so that I may tell his mother."

Those simple words spoken in such an earnest tone shattered all Lancelot's previous theories. After his interview with the woman who so often shadowed 55, Church-street, he had honestly believed she was Mrs. Stuart, but his conviction was shaken now.

James Stuart could not speak thus of his wife if he knew she was still alive, and an outcast from everything good and pleasant.

No, Bob Dawson must be right and Mrs. Stuart indeed dead; but who was the woman who had so disgusted Lance?

"Jack must be cleared soon," said Elizabeth, hopefully, "and then things will take a turn."

"I'm glad that Etta's wedding won't need to be put off," said Mr. Stuart, cheerfully. "I should have been sorry if an old man's illness had interfered with that; but I shall be as well as ever by the twentieth of September, child, and I mean to tell Bob when he comes in to-night that nothing need interfere with the marriage."

"Bob has not been here for three whole days," said Elizabeth, thoughtfully; "he must think you a great deal better, father."

"Or he doesn't care to waste any more time over a gratis patient," said Aunt Mary, bitterly.

"I am quite sure that is not what keeps Mr. Dawson away," said Lancelot, warmly. "Besides, Mr. Stuart is not a gratis patient. I am sure if a doctor's bill came in it would be met."

"Bob never sends us bills," said the blind man.

"When he was a small boy I took him for reduced terms, and in consideration of that he attends us all; but we haven't troubled him much, we are a singularly healthy family."

"I am quite sure Bob will come to-night," put in Elizabeth. "Etta," suddenly turning to her sister, "is he extra busy just now that he hasn't been here since Saturday?"

"I don't know," said the girl, pettishly; "Mr. Dawson's affairs are nothing to me. You may as well know the truth now, Elizabeth, I wouldn't speak before while your father was so ill—I have broken off my engagement."

The news fell upon them like a thunderbolt. The blind man started and muttered something

which sounded like a curse; Elizabeth grew pale as death, and Aunt Mary said with unruffled calm,—

"Just what I expected; you were born to bring misery on other people."

Lancelot would gladly have left the room, but an imploring glance from Elizabeth kept him in his seat.

"Please stay," whispered the girl, "I am so afraid of the shock of this for father, and his first coming down, too; please stay and help him to bear it."

Lancelot nodded; he and Elizabeth understood each other without need of words, he looked eagerly at the blind man, and wondered what he would say to his rebellious child. He had not long to wait. Mr. Stuart turned to Etta, and said, gravely,—

"There must be some mistake. Child, think twice before you break an honest heart. You accepted Robert Dawson of your own free will not six months' ago; what has changed you?"

"I did not accept him of my own free will, he worried me into it," retorted Etta; "I never cared for him. I don't want to spend the best years of my life in hopeless, grinding poverty; I mean to enjoy myself and have plenty of money. I was made for something better than to be the wife of a struggling surgeon!"

"You were made to be the curse of all who knew you," said Aunt Mary, bitterly; but the blind man interposed,—

"Patience, sister, let me come to the bottom of this. How do you propose to get plenty of money, Etta? You left home once, and did not find life much more delightful at Barton than here. What do you mean to do? for, understand me plainly, I won't have you flouting your faithlessness under Bob's very eyes."

"I should not stay here, in any case," said Etta; "I am going away—I should have gone sooner, only I wanted to break with Bob first, and I thought it would trouble Elizabeth if I went while you were ill."

She had been speaking recklessly, defiantly, but her tone softened as she spoke Elizabeth's name. Even now, Etta dearly loved the girl who had been to her as a sister all her life.

"And where are you going?" demanded James Stuart. "Surely your father has a right to ask that?"

"You are not my father," said Etta, speaking with pitiless distinctness; "it is time for the farce to end. I know the truth, and how you have wronged me all these years."

"Wronged you?" Aunt Mary could not keep silence any longer. "Child, you must be mad! Was it wronging you to keep you out of the workhouse, and to let you bear an honest name?"

"Yes," retorted Etta, "it was wronging me to make me suffer poverty and privations when my father was a wealthy nobleman, and I might have had every luxury in his home. You were jealous, I suppose, that your sister's child should be better off than your own children! My poor mother was dead; there was no one to tell my father of my birth and claim my rights, and so I suffered from your envy."

"Silence!" thundered the blind man with more anger than his mild, kindly face looked capable of; "silence, miserable girl, you don't know what you are saying."

"I know now," said Etta, fiercely; "my ignorance was ended on the twentieth of August; I have stayed here since my eyes were opened solely for Elizabeth's sake. Of course," and she delivered her thrust with quiet insolence, "it was not pleasant for a nobleman's daughter to remain in the house with a common thief; it might injure my future sadly if the Baron Bolcovre discovered my cousin John's crime; but for Elizabeth's sake I—"

She was interrupted. Lancelot Underwood rose up tall, dark, commanding.

"There is such a virtue as gratitude," he said slowly, "and that at least should close your lips. As for my friend, John Stuart, I am as convinced of his innocence as I am of my own. If your informant as to your parentage is the person I believe, Miss Etta, I can only beg you to beware of her, she is not a fit person for you to know."

"She is my mother's friend," said Etta, insolently, "and she will see me righted. I have had enough of shabby gentility; I mean to wash my hands of Ashley Green."

She was gone. They heard the parlour-door bang as she rushed out of the room and climbed the stairs, and a wonderful sense of relief came to the four she had left; it was as though a terrible oppression had been removed, and they could talk and reason once again.

"Father," said Elizabeth, "please help me to understand. What did Etta mean?"

"She meant, my dear child, that she is not your sister; she has discovered a secret I had kept from her in all kindness."

"And paid thirty pounds a year to others to keep," said Aunt Mary, tartly. "You've heard of your Aunt Henrietta, my dear, who married a Frenchman? Well, her husband deserted her, and she had fallen on evil times. Your mother, who was far too good for this world, agreed to bring Henrietta's baby up as her own child. Your own little sister died at her birth, and I don't suppose anyone ever suspected the little creature we brought home from Hayes was not your father's motherless baby."

"We've had a hard struggle, as you know, and we never could manage to love Etta as well as we loved you and Jack. We did our best for her, you'll admit yourself that there was no difference made between you, but just as she had from her father a foreign face and French airs and graces, so she had inherited her mother's cruel, selfish nature and helpless ways."

"Does Bob know?" breathed Elizabeth.

"No, I meant to tell him before the wedding, and warn him at all costs to keep his wife away from her mother."

"Her mother?"

"Yes, my ill-fated sister is still alive—there's a skeleton in every closet, Betty, and that's the one in ours. I have never seen Henrietta's face for years, but I've paid her regularly month by month to keep away from the child; often it's gone against the grain with me to take the money that would have made you and Jack more comfortable, but the Stuarts had always held up their heads, and I couldn't bear for the world to know how low my sister had sunk. The night I was taken ill I saw her, well, I don't mean I saw her for a blind man's eyes can't tell friend from foe, but I heard her voice, and she threatened then to reveal herself to Etta. Perhaps, I was down before about Jack's trouble, but somehow the thought of how we'd toiled all these years to keep the child who after all was none of ours, and how we'd paid her mother to leave her unmolested, and then at last for it all to be useless; it was all too much for me, Elizabeth, and I broke down."

"And you think this woman—my aunt, has seen Etta?"

"Yes, but I fancy she has called herself her 'mother's friend,' not disclosed her true relationship between them."

"Is Etta's father really so rich—and why doesn't he live with his wife?"

The blind man glossed over both questions.—"He may be rich, he was poor enough when I knew him; he and my sister quarrelled terribly, she said he deserted her, but I fancy she was willing enough for him to go. Things haven't gone well with her since; perhaps she thinks he would make it up."

"You saw her, Mr. Underwood," said Aunt Mary, "when you took my brother's message."

"I saw her," he hesitated, "but I find it hard to believe she is your sister, Miss Stuart."

The old maid sighed.

"She was the beauty of the family and our mother's darling; she was engaged to a cousin of our own, and she jilted him just as her child was jilted Bob; nothing ever went well with her after."

"Poor Geoff," said the blind man sadly. "I've often thought I'd give a great deal to see him once again and learn how it fared with him."

"But he is dead," said Elizabeth, "don't you know, father, you told me he sailed for South Africa and the ship went under."

"No dear heart," a flickering smile crossed the patient face. "I never heard of Geoffrey's

death; he sailed for Africa, and as in all these five-and-twenty years I've heard no word of him, I've fancied that the tempest of this world's troubles was too much for him, and he'd gone under fortune's waves."

"I see," murmured the girl, "you meant ruin not death. I always thought before you meant Cousin Geoffrey was drowned, you and Aunt Mary can never bear to speak of him."

"Well," said Mary Stuart musingly, "I've always a sort of feeling we didn't act kindly by Geoff; you see Betty we were richer in those days and we held our heads high, and Geoffrey was nothing but a printer's workman, a 'comp' he used to call himself, and we thought our pretty sister might have done better. Many's the time I've regretted my share in the past; if Henrietta had only married Geoffrey her story would be very different."

A lump came into Mr. Underwood's throat, he longed to tell them of their kinsman's good fortune; but his lips were sealed, Mr. Bertram in his last letter had positively forbidden any immediate revelation; no expense was to be spared, the operation on Jim's eyes was to be performed as soon as possible, little Etta was to have five hundred pounds on her wedding day, but not till this was accomplished, not until the family had actually enjoyed a share of his prosperity, were they to know of their kinsman's generosity; how to compass this puzzled Lancelot more than he could say; if only he had had a free hand and not been forced to secrecy he would have chosen this moment of all others to divulge his mission; as it was he could only keep silence, and the tea which had waited all this time was now partaken of, but with scant appetites; for Betty's tears were falling fast, and both her elders were sorely troubled.

"Someone ought to go and speak to Etta," said Aunt Mary at last, "she can't mean to leave us now without a word of warning, or even telling us where she is going."

"Go to her, Elizabeth," said the blind man, "tell her, that after all these years we cannot part in anger; beg her to remain with us at any rate until she has received a written invitation from her father."

Elizabeth Stuart went upstairs with a dull weight at her heart. She had known many sorrows, but she had never felt such a heavy burden of anxiety as was her portion now. Bob's life wrecked; Etta false and about to desert them; her father only just convalescent, and Jack still under a cloud—surely no girl in England had sorrier need for tears than Betty.

But her eyes were dry as she knocked gently at Etta's door. An hour ago she would have gone in without ceremony, secure of her welcome, but now all was changed. Etta was not her sister any longer, but a great heiress whose grand relations might think it a disgrace that she had lived so long in a shabby house at Ashley Green, and associated with Jack. The taunt about Jack was the last drop of anguish in Betty's cup.

There was no answer and she went in. The room bore signs of hasty packing, but of Etta herself there was no sign. The truth came home to Betty slowly. While they were busy talking, Etta had taken her bag (it must have been prepared ready) and crept noiselessly downstairs, even while they discussed her future she had escaped them.

Elizabeth sat down on the bed and tried to think. This was no sudden flight. The last actual departure might have been hurried, but the preparations had been deliberately made. Looking round, the elder girl missed sundry things which could not have been carried away together. No, Etta must have gone to some place in the immediate locality, and carried her possessions there piecemeal, for there seemed absolutely nothing worth removing, of hers remaining. The large box she had taken to Barton stood open, but it was well nigh empty. One of her oldest dresses hung behind the door.

They had been cruelly deserted by one for whom they had done much . . . then Elizabeth's very heart seemed to stand still; lying on the floor was something bright and glittering. She picked it up almost mechanically, and found

a cuff-stud, a solitaire of rich dead gold for sole ornament, a key raised on the point in black enamel. Betty's hand seemed going round and round. This was one of the studs Mr. Bates had alluded to as worn by the thief who cashed Mr. Hunter's cheque for five hundred pounds. This stud was almost the only clue to his identity, and lo! here it was in Etta's bedroom. What did it mean? Could the girl who had already deceived them so cruelly have stolen the cheque? but no! that was impossible. Etta could not have gained an entrance to the merchant's private room; besides, it was a tall fair man who had presented the stolen cheque.

Betty put one hand to her aching head and tried to think. Bit by bit things were growing clearer to her poor throbbing brain.

Lancelot Underwood had assured her he had seen her sister at Barton, Sunday after Sunday with a tall fair man.

Etta had broken her engagement with Bob. Most likely she had now accepted the stranger from Barton. The terrible truth forced itself on Betty. The real thief, the man for whose crime poor Jack was suffering a heavy burden of suspicion—this man was Etta's lover; he had given her the studs; perhaps simply to get rid of them; perhaps—oh! the thought was maddening, thinking that if he could only get the fatal trinkets into the possession of the Stuarts, he would be forging another link in the chain of evidence which should convict Jack of his own crime. Oh! it was cruel, cruel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BERYL HUNTER thought a great deal of her chance meeting with Mr. Stuart. She could not get Jack and his sad story out of her mind. The merchant's heiress had led such a cared-for sheltered life that very few cases of real trouble had come under her notice; and, perhaps, this was why her sympathies had gone out more readily to the little family in Church Street than they might have done if she had been used to sad scenes, and grown indifferent to suffering by often hearing of it.

Beryl did not tell her father of her meeting with Jack. She felt that Mr. Hunter would not enter into her feelings, and she was loth to do anything which could vex him at this time, because since his discovery of Kenneth Bertram's treachery he had been grave and dispirited. He took the matter sadly to heart. He had cared for the handsome fascinating scapegrace so much that he felt the parting as a real personal grief, and he reproached himself continually; first, that he had not discovered how badly Kenneth was going on, and tried long ago to turn him from the error of his ways; and next that in his short-sightedness he had actually urged his child to marry an unmitigated scoundrel.

"I knew I was only a plain business man," he said to her sometimes, "but I did think I was prudent and far-seeing, yet look at the blunder I made. If I had had my way, child, you and your fortune would now be at the mercy of as crafty a villain as ever breathed."

He repeated this lament the very day of Beryl's visit to Kew, as he sat with his daughter lingering pleasantly over dessert, and the girl bravely kept to herself the terrible doubt whether Kenneth had not committed a worse sin still, and stolen the cheque whose loss had caused so much misery.

"The cleverest person in the world makes a mistake sometimes, papa," she said gently, "and it was just because you were fond of Ken you were deceived by him. I wouldn't go worrying over it if I were you. The past is past, you know. He hasn't done us very much harm, and how could you warn other people against him when you never suspected anything yourself?"

Robert Hunter sighed.

"I can't tell you why, child; I'm not the sort of man to be troubled by presentiment; but I feel a kind of certainty that we have not heard the last of Kenneth Bertram. Somehow or other I believe he will yet work us mischief."

"I don't see how he can," said Beryl, practically;

"he won't dare to come here, because this is the father place his creditors would search for him. It seems to me Ken will just drop out of our lives."

Perhaps her persuasions were effectual, or Mr. Hunter conquered his fears, for he said no more of his anxiety; and in the course of the next few days he grew more cheerful—more himself—so that Beryl hoped he was getting over his terrible disappointment.

She was surprised to find that instead of rejoicing at this change in her father she began to feel more and more anxious herself. It was as though the burden of Mr. Hunter's fears had been transferred to her.

She was restless and uneasy. She hardly knew what she expected, only she seemed certain that the intense quiet of those August days was but the calm which precedes a storm.

Not for worlds would she have spoken to her father; but there were times when she longed to go to London and have an interview with his trusted manager.

Mr. Bates had been in the merchant's service no many years he would have guarded his employer's secrets as his own.

He was a cool, practical man of business, and might have chased away the fears which had taken hold of Beryl by a few short words.

And the fears were these. Knowing Kenneth as she did, Beryl was positive he would never give up a single luxury, never deny himself a single pleasure if he could possibly help it. From Mr. Brett's testimony he had five hundred pounds when he disappeared. Too well Beryl guessed now how that sum had been obtained; but five hundred pounds would not last for ever—in fact, with a man of most expensive tastes and extravagant habits, who was given to speculations on the turf, it was not likely to last many weeks.

When the proceeds of the stolen cheque were gone, what would be Kenneth's next step to raise money?

In the first heat of indignation against his kinsman Mr. Hunter had given orders that Kenneth Bertram was never to be admitted to his office. A similar order had been given to the servants at The Fire; but then it was not in the least likely that Ken would present himself at either place in his true character, it would be far too dangerous.

He would come, if he came at all, skilfully disguised, and send in some plausible message which would induce Mr. Hunter to see him.

In those days Beryl was almost frantic when any stranger came to The Fire—a Sister-of-Mercy, collecting subscriptions for an orphanage, the agent of a publishing firm, shortly to issue a guide to Barton and the neighbourhood, and a clergyman, bearing an introduction from a friend of Mr. Hunter's youth—one and all filled her with terror. When the Sister-of-Mercy proved to be little above five feet high, the agent to be a bald old man of sixty, and the young clergyman at least a head shorter than Kenneth, she breathed again. She had insisted on receiving all of them, but in each case she had been prepared to find the stranger her erring cousin, skilfully made up.

Kenneth had been an adept at amateur theatricals, and his cousin had heard of his performances though she had never witnessed them, and no doubt this added to her fears.

"Beryl, you look like a ghost," said her father one evening towards the end of August; "if you don't get back your roses soon I shall listen to any of your excuses, but shall carry you off to the sea at once."

To his intense surprise she made no remonstrance.

"I really think, papa, we both want a change. If we went to Hastings or Brighton you could run up to town whenever you wanted to be at the office. Generally, I like home better than any other place; but just now I shall be glad to leave The Fire."

"Do you feel ill," cried Mr. Hunter in alarm, "shall I send for Martin?"

"Dr. Martin would laugh at us both," said Beryl, cheerfully; "for there is nothing whatever the matter with me, only I have got a kind of restless fit on me."

She went to bed early that night, leaving her father writing business letters in the library.

The Fire was a large substantial house, built with every modern convenience, and the servants' rooms were a long way from the principal apartments. Beryl and her father were quite isolated from the rest of the household.

Miss Hunter had rather liked this arrangement hitherto. She said it was so quiet to hear no one moving about, but she was not quite so pleased with the loneliness at night.

She was not sleepy, though she had come upstairs early. She put on a soft white dressing-gown, but her beautiful hair fell over her shoulders, and sat down in a low chair by the open window to enjoy the third volume of a novel in which she was interested. Her room was at the back of the house, and looked out on to the beautiful flower garden. The moon had risen and bathed the grounds in a soft silvery splendour. It was nearing the full, and so the scene outside was as light as day. Beryl did not really need the small silver lamp which was burning on a table in front of her chair.

She read on and on till she became engrossed in the story, and forgot the fears and misgivings which for a time had troubled her so sadly. She heard her father come upstairs, and pass into his own room, locking the door after him. She looked at her watch and found it not far off midnight, but the interest of her book was so keen she never thought of putting it down. She read on to the last page, then as she closed the volume she realized that she was really very sleepy, and not at all inclined for the exertion of undressing, and now as she came to this decision she fell asleep.

She woke with a start, and that peculiar chill feeling of discomfort which comes to people who have been sleeping dressed. She was as cold and cramped as though she had been keeping a long and painful vigil. She put one hand to her head and tried to remember how she came to be up so late. The hall clock had just struck two, and then a terrible consciousness forced itself upon her that she could hear a hushed measured footfall in the room beneath, and that incredible as it seemed, someone was really moving about downstairs at that uncanny hour of the night.

She listened with feverish anxiety, and the doubt became a certainty. Someone was in the library, and though they were evidently trying to make as little noise as possible, she could distinctly hear their footfall.

It must be her father. Like herself he had fallen asleep in his chair instead of going to bed; but no, as memory returned more fully, she distinctly recollected hearing him pass her door, and a little later lock his own.

But for that locked door Beryl would have gone to him at once and told him her fears, but Mr. Hunter was a sound sleeper; before she could arouse his attention and get him to open the door her efforts would have been heard downstairs, and the midnight intruder would have taken flight.

After all could anyone be there.

The Fire was a well-built house, with every proper precaution in the way of bolts and bars. The butler himself slept downstairs close to his plate. But then the library was at the extreme end of the house, and divided from the butler by three other rooms and a long corridor. Probably it was only fancy, and she would find no one there after all, but she knew if she did not go downstairs she would never close her eyes all through the night.

She had often gone down to the library before in the silent hours to find a book, and even if the whole household knew of her present errand they would see nothing strange or remarkable in it.

Beryl was brave enough to go and see for herself if her fears were groundless, but she had not the courage to stay alone in her own room for the rest of the night listening for every sound and dreading at every moment that the midnight marauder might find his way upstairs.

"There's nothing in the library anyone would care to take," she reflected, "the books are too heavy, and books don't sell for much, though

they cost a great deal. Of course I shall find no one there, but I shan't have a moment's peace to-night unless I go and see."

She made a vision of beauty as she rose to go on her strange errand. The soft white dressing-gown just suited her fair dainty loveliness, and excitement had brought a faint rose flush to her cheeks—a brilliant light to her eyes.

She left the lamp burning in her own room, for the moonlight was quite sufficient for her purpose. She shivered just a little as she stepped out into the long corridor. She tried her father's door softly and found it locked; then she went on down the grand staircase, her little kid slippers making no sound on the rich soft carpet. She drew her breath a little nervously as she found herself in the hall, but she never faltered in her purpose.

The library was immediately beneath Beryl's own room, both looked out on to the garden, but the former had long French windows which opened on to the terrace; there were no shutters, the windows which were really glass doors fastened with a patent lock, the panes were strong and substantial, so that (as Mr. Hunter once remarked, when some one warned him of burglars) it would have required a good many blows to break them, and the long panes of glass were so narrow that if removed bodily by a skilful housebreaker no full-sized shoulders could possibly have passed through them.

All this flashed through Beryl's mind as she went on her way, she told herself again and again there could be no one in the library, and yet an irresistible power impelled her to continue her steps till she reached the door; it was closed and bolted on the outside. Mr. Hunter's invariable practice, all the reception rooms at the Fire were fitted with two brass bolts which were secured at night, the neighbourhood was somewhat a lonely one, and the merchant made this arrangement with the remark that if thieves did visit him, they'd find they couldn't get out of one room into another, but would have to break into each one separately from the outside. Beryl thought of this as she slid back the bolts noiselessly, then her heart well nigh stopped beating for she distinctly heard a fluttering sound as the rustle of leaves turned swiftly over. Was her first fear right after all, had thieves really come to invade The Fire?

She never faltered, the door yielded to her touch and opened noiselessly, she looked cautiously in still under that terrible nameless fear of the unseen which comes to us when we stand on the brink of an unknown peril. A man was seated at her father's writing table with a pen in his hand; she could see nothing because his back was turned towards her, one of the glass doors stood wide open showing plainly how the stranger had effected an entrance. But was it a stranger? A sick, terrible suspicion was fast taking possession of Beryl. In the old days when her cousin Kenneth had stayed with them so much as to be almost a son of the house, he had been allowed a duplicate key of that very window. Ken's hours were erratic, and Mr. Hunter did not like his servants kept up late. Ken had been used to admit himself thus without disturbing the household, and it flashed upon the trembling girl that *key had never been returned*. Beryl's knees shook so terribly that she could hardly move and an awful uncertainty seized on her; should she summon her father or the butler? but her father had been so distressed and upset at the evil they had already learned of Kenneth, it seemed cruel to force this fresh discovery upon him while Beryl shrank under loathing from the bare thought of exposing her kinsman's disgrace to a servant.

"He cannot harm me," the brave girl decided; "low as Ken has fallen he would not raise his hand against a woman."

She walked on. With firmer step now, towards the table, the man turned round suddenly, and they were face to face.

Beryl saw a tall man of her cousin's build and figure, but with dark hair and moustache, large disfiguring blue spectacles, and a complexion of an olive tint rarely seen in English people.

For one moment the two stood looking at each other, then, quick as lightning, Kenneth Bertram



BERYL WALKED TOWARDS THE TABLE WITH A FIRM STEP, WHEN SUDDENLY THE MAN TURNED AND FACED HER.

seized hold of her arm; then, still holding her, he went to the door and locked it.

"You are in my power," he said, in a low vindictive whisper; "make the slightest attempt to call for help, and I will silence your cries for ever."

With his disengaged hand he took a pistol from his pocket and deliberately pointed it at her.

Beryl's cries froze on her lips unuttered. She was not a coward; but life was very sweet to her. She knew her father was wrapped up in her, and would rather lose his whole property than harm should come to her; but it was not that which kept her silent; she was like a creature spellbound.

Bertram had taken off his spectacles and stood staring straight into her face with his wonderful violet eyes.

She had never felt their power before. Now their effect on her was magical, her trembling voice would not obey her. Try as she would to struggle against that detaining hand she could avail nothing, she was a passive captive in Bertram's keeping.

Quick as thought he took a large handkerchief from his pocket, and knotted it round the girl's hands, fastening them behind her so tightly that the bandage cut into the fair delicate skin.

"You'd better hold your tongue," he said, brutally, "or it'll be the worse for you. When a man's come to such a pass as I have he doesn't stand at much."

He kept his eyes fixed on her; but, indeed, what chance had she of escape. The door was locked, the key in his pocket; he was between her and the window. She would fain have screamed, but her voice would not come. She had actually to look on in enforced quiet while Bertram continued his nefarious work.

He had forced open one of the drawers of Mr. Hunter's writing-table, and from it he coolly helped himself to a bag of gold and a half-empty cheque-book.

"You wouldn't have me to reign here as Prince Consort, so you've only got yourself to

blame if I take a little money to help me along. As soon as I am safe off you can make out a piteous story to my uncle; but it won't matter to me. He'll find it pretty difficult to trace me, for London's a big place, and besides I shan't stay in London now I've the means to travel. You can tell your father I wish he kept a little more money about the premises. Still, two hundred quid are not to be despised. I'll look him up again the next time I'm hard up. Ta ta, Beryl! you can rouse the house now if you like. By the time you make any one hear I shall be off."

He was gone.

It was some minutes before Beryl regained the use of her shattered faculties; then she did the wisest thing in her power. She went to the long bellrope, and (her hands being bound behind her) pulled it frantically with her teeth.

Three times the strange summons rang out; then the butler and Mr. Hunter, both well-nigh frantic at the third alarm, stood at the library door, and in vain attempted to open it.

"I'm locked in!" said Beryl in a faint, shaky voice, which went to her father's very heart. "Oh, come quick; help me!"

The butler was a strong man. He looked at his master for assent, and then, putting his broad shoulders to the work, broke in the door. It was a hard task even for his strength; but it was quickly done. Then the two men rushed in to find Beryl, her hands bound tightly, and a look of abject terror on her lovely face.

"There's been a robbery, sir!" gasped the butler, catching sight of the open drawer, the contents of which strewn the floor, and the unlocked bureau. "I should say my young lady disturbed the thief at his work. It's a mercy she's not been killed!"

"I tried to scream," said Beryl, "but he pointed a pistol at me, and I suppose I was frightened, for I couldn't make a sound."

"Do you know if he's taken much, miss?" said the butler, anxiously.

"A bag of gold and your cheque-book, father; that is the worst!"

"The fright to you is the worst," said Robert Hunter, kindly. "I can telegraph to the bank to pay no cheques till they see me, and I can stand the loss of the gold; but that you should have suffered so is horrible!"

"It was my own fault. I ought to have roused you or Jones; but I thought I heard footsteps, and I would come down just to persuade myself I was mistaken;" and then, with a sobbing cry, she fainted.

Her wrists were bruised and discoloured. Her eyes had a scared look of terror in their depths, it was patent to everyone she had gone through a terrible experience.

Mr. Hunter aroused the old nurse, who was still Beryl's personal attendant, and she soon had her young lady safely in bed; but about eight o'clock she came down from her charge with an anxious face, and a request that the groom, who was even then starting for Barton with the telegram for the bank, should bring back Dr. Martin.

"For I can't help thinking, sir, the shock has done more harm to Miss Beryl than we know of. She doesn't take the least bit of notice of me. She's not asleep, for her eyes are wide open; but she doesn't seem to see anything around her or to hear me when I speak to her."

The evening papers that day contained a long account of the robbery at The Vire; but stated it was probable the guilty man would get off scot free, as the only person who had actually seen him was so terribly upset by the shock as to be quite incapable of answering any questions or giving the slightest description of the thief.

(To be continued.)

BERLIN is one of the most cosmopolitan of European cities. Though it is the capital of Germany, only 37 per cent. of its inhabitants are Germans by birth.



"TIS A SIGN OF DEATH, ALWAYS—THERE'S MURDER IN THE AIR," SAID MRS. COMFORT, TREMBLINGLY.

LADY LUCILLA.

—101—

CHAPTER III.

TWENTY YEARS AFTERWARDS.

It was a raw and blustery March evening towards seven o'clock; the lamps upon the platform of the Churnborough station flickered and piped miserably in the draught; the fast train which every afternoon left Waterloo station for the borderland of the south-western shires was already due at Churnborough—in fact, it was five minutes late.

Among the divers groups of people waiting about on the platform might be seen on this particular evening the solitary figure of a man—a well-made, broad-shouldered man, with a thick brown beard which he wore very short and close-trimmed.

His fearless, direct-looking eyes were brown and bright, though now, in the uncertain light of the fitfully-burning station lamps, they had taken a thoughtful far-off expression which rendered them almost sad.

He was neither tall nor short, but of average medium height, looking stalwart and manly enough, however, for any Englishman as he stood patiently waiting there in his long rough winter coat.

Apparently he was perfectly well known in Churnborough, for more than one porter, as they passed him, touched their caps respectfully.

Two countrywomen from the neighbouring village of Gwynne were sitting on a seat hard by, their marketing baskets on their knees, their shawls gathered closely around their shoulders.

"My patience! Is it really true," said one of them under her breath, "that Miss Lostwithiel is a-coming to live at Grayladies with the old lady? I heard as how it was to be."

"Oh, 'tis true enough," replied the other; "for Farmer Spinner told my old man so, and he said that it was Mrs. Comfort herself up at the great house who told him."

"Then I s'pose that Mr. Chester have come along here a-purpose to meet her," the first speaker said, glancing curiously at the quiet stalwart figure, whose back was turned towards the two women.

"That's about it, I expect. I know she was coming this evening, and I saw the carriage outside."

"Poor young creature!" exclaimed the other involuntarily.

The long train at that moment came hissing into the station, and all was bustle and confusion on the spot.

Mr. Chester, on the alert, remained standing where he was until his keen watchful eyes had seen the door of a first-class carriage open rather hurriedly, and a young girl, darkly and warmly clad in seal skin, step out alone upon the platform and look very anxiously around her.

He made his way swiftly through the crowd then, and, lifting his hat, spoke.

"My name is Valentine Chester," he said at once to her, in the plain straightforward fashion which was characteristic of the man, feeling perfectly sure that his instinct had not misled him.

"Have I the honour of addressing Miss Lostwithiel?"

She raised to his, then, a pale and delicately beautiful face, with tragic, sorrowful eyes, answering in accents of perceptible relief the stranger who had just accosted her.

"Yes," she said, "I am Hazel Lostwithiel. I trust that you are here to meet me?"

"I am certainly here to meet you, and to save you all further bother," he told her, in his pleasant reassuring way. "Lady Lucilla, being unable to come herself, requested me to be her deputy and representative; so here you see me. If you will accompany me outside, we shall find the carriage—it is waiting for us at the gates—and get out of this wretched din in which it is impossible to speak. Your luggage? Oh, that shall be all right, never fear. This is the way, Miss Lostwithiel."

There was a quiet cheeriness, a brave simplicity

of bearing always, about Valentine Chester, that strangers especially were wont to find attractive.

By the very clasp even of his strong firm hand people knew instinctively that he was a man to be trusted.

Indeed, that genial, straightforward manner of his—which could be very gentle too sometimes—with his strongly-marked, steadfast-looking face, rarely failed to win for him a lasting regard both from men and women alike.

So Hazel, dimly conscious even in that first moment of their meeting that this Valentine Chester would surely prove to her a staunch friend in the sombre future now looming ahead, followed him obediently from the busy platform, and took her place in the Grayladies carriage.

Tiredly she leaned back against the fusty-smelling padding of that most ancient vehicle, and covered her face with her hands.

Valentine, affecting not to notice the action, went off to look after the luggage.

He soon returned, the girl's trunks got safely together for the cart which had come for them, and, entering the carriage, seated himself opposite to Miss Lostwithiel.

He could talk to her better thus, he thought, as they drove from Churnborough to Gwynne.

"It is a great nuisance, Miss Lostwithiel, is it not," he remarked cheerily, as the old-fashioned yellow chariot rolled away down the road, leaving behind them the numerous lights of the town thickly studing the windy darkness surrounding it, "having to come such a distance to find the railway! Gwynne being regarded as quite an out-of-the-way sort of place, of no importance whatever, no one seems to think it worth while to suggest that the village would at least be grateful for a junction."

"I suppose not," assented Hazel, with a listless, preoccupied little smile, her beautiful eyes with their tragic shadow of unutterable sorrow meeting Valentine's for an instant in the wan illumination of the carriage-lamps.

"No. And consequently," he continued, hoping by a species of random, commonplace talk

to allure the present meditations of the young girl from their obviously gloomy channel. "Gwynne's picturesque beauty, you see, remains entirely undisturbed. 'A nook of English ground secure,'—as nature-loving Wordsworth would joyfully have described it—"

But Hazel Lostwithiel interrupted him. She had not understood, indeed she had scarcely listened to, a word of his last speech.

"Is it not twenty years ago now?" she said, earnestly, bending forward and laying one little gloved hand upon Valentine's rough sleeve, the better so to command his attention—"is it not twenty years ago now since my father parted—parted in bitterest anger from my grandmother, and quitted Grayladies for ever?"

He was startled somewhat at the abrupt question, and hesitated before replying to it.

A great pity was filling his heart to overflowing as he looked at this lonely child—the same kind of deep, chivalrous, manly compassion which somehow had taken so strong a hold of him concerning her and her destiny the moment he had heard from Lady Lucilla that Sir Mordred Lostwithiel's young daughter must come to dwell with her grandmother at Grayladies.

What an existence it would be for this other Hazel, he had thought sadly—he who knew the old place so well—for a young girl fresh from the monotony of school routine, and ready for, expecting perhaps, a far different life!

From that dark, heart-breaking hour when her ladyship and Sir Mordred had parted from each other to meet again never on earth—that June night when Mordred Lostwithiel had severed himself from Gwynne, Gwynne people, and all Gwynne associations, which were to be for him henceforward as though they had never been—from that dark hour Grayladies had fallen under a ban, as it were.

The younger servants deserted the house one after another, and none could be found willing to fill their vacant posts.

No one, in fact, unless absolutely compelled, would venture near the place either by night or by day.

Lady Lucilla herself was never seen abroad; and soon the people in Gwynne, and elsewhere likewise, learned to speak of the Lady Lucilla Lostwithiel with bated breath and significant gestures.

Very ugly stories had somehow or other got abroad with regard to the mystery of the disappearance of Hazel Hope.

People indeed had long since grown to believe that Sir Mordred Lostwithiel himself, individually, was wholly guiltless in the matter of that curious disappearance of Hazel's from Grayladies, which had caused such stir and commotion in the neighbourhood in the years gone by.

The river, after all, said the wiseacres in the village, knew best what had befallen the lost Hazel Hope.

Yes, the wild rushing river, with its horrible depths, and Lady Lucilla Lostwithiel between them, knew best the hapless fate of Sir Mordred's lost love.

When next the desolate mother heard aught concerning her son, it was news of him contained in a letter from his solicitor, telling her of Sir Mordred's decease.

He had been married, it appeared; had, moreover, been left a widower shortly after his marriage; had died, leaving behind him one child, a girl, whom he had named "Hazel," to succeed to the whole of his earthly possessions, and who, as soon as she should have attained her eighteenth year, was to leave school and go to live at Grayladies with her grandmother, Lady Lucilla.

The old mansion and everything appertaining thereto was in reality the estate of the late Sir Mordred Lostwithiel, and, as such, therefore, it must descend to his only child; who, utterly friendless in the world, save for her grandmother, should eventually be placed under that grandmother's care.

The memorable letter apprising Lady Lucilla of these most unlooked-for events had arrived at Grayladies just two years before; and the tidings, notwithstanding their mournful character, had brought fresh life to the weary soul of the penitent.

Mordred's own child entrusted to her guardianship! Mordred's own young daughter permitted to come to her home and hearth! Thank Heaven indeed! For then, in dying, he must have forgiven her!

And now the girl was eighteen that Easter-tide; and on that blustering March evening she had arrived at the Churnborough station, in order to take up her abode in the gloomy, haunted old house of which she alone—Hazel Lostwithiel—was the rightful owner.

Something of all this, then, was running vaguely through the mind of Valentine Chester, as he looked with such infinite pity and interest into the sorrowful face of the young mistress of Grayladies.

And so, he thought, dreamily, Sir Mordred, although he had married as time went on, had kept green in his heart the memory of his poor vanished love—calling his little daughter "Hazel" in remembrance of Hazel Hope.

"Why do you not answer me?" Hazel Lostwithiel said, in low eager tones, touching Valentine's sleeve again in order to rouse him from his reverie and abstraction.

"I—I beg your pardon. Twenty years ago, do you ask?" he said, gently. "Yes, Miss Lostwithiel—that would be about the time I should say. I was a boy of fifteen in that year, I remember. I am thirty-five, now."

"Are you really thirty-five?" said Hazel, with a gleam of innocent girlish interest.

"I am indeed, really," he returned, with a bright, amused smile.

"But then," said the girl, with a puzzled air, "if you are only thirty-five, you cannot possibly be the same Mr. Valentine Chester concerning whom I have sometimes heard my dear father speak—the Valentine Chester who was so good a friend to him, and also to—Lady Lucilla."

"Ah, you are thinking of my father," the young man answered. "You see, Miss Lostwithiel, when he died, I, as his only son, stepped naturally into his place at home. His friends remained my friends; his business cares and duties and responsibilities all devolved upon me—became as it were peculiarly my own, as an inheritance from father to son. 'Never desert the Lostwithiels,' were almost his last words—'no matter—no matter—'"

Valentine Chester stopped short, looking half vexed with himself.

He was conscious perhaps that, in his desire to interest his companion, he had allowed himself to go too far.

"Yes, yes," she put in, with a touch of eager impatience, "and what else! Go on, please."

There was no help for it now, he saw. He must continue, therefore—must finish telling her now that which he had been indiscreet enough to begin.

Yet annoyed with himself as he felt, he was too truthful by nature to prevaricate.

"No matter," said my father," Valentine ended hurriedly, "what the world may say of them, or how judge their deeds. In weal or in woe, in prosperity or in misfortune, you must stand by them, their friend always. Just as I have done throughout my life, I charge you to do throughout yours. Never desert the Lostwithiels."

"And I gave him my sacred word. My father and Sir Mordred's father, as doubtless you are aware, Miss Lostwithiel, were sincerely attached to each other."

Hazel Lostwithiel clasped her hands entreatingly. Her great sorrowful eyes were brimming with unfallen tears.

It was the most wistful, the very saddest young face in all creation just then, thought Valentine Chester, with a sense of suffocation about his heart and a mist before his own true eyes.

Surely the girl must have divined already to what a dark inheritance she was journeying now—to what a burthen of horror and desolation she had succeeded, with the accursed birthright of Grayladies!

But what—how much—did she actually know, Valentine wondered, of the terrible history of Hazel Hope?

"And you never will desert the Lostwithiels, will you, Mr. Chester?" cried Sir Mordred's

daughter; her faith and trust in the man opposite to her somehow growing stronger with every minute. "Promise me—promise me, here, now, in this carriage, that you will not!"

"I have never yet broken my given word, Miss Lostwithiel," Valentine returned, proudly and quietly. "Have not I already told you that I promised long ago to stand by the Lostwithiels to the last?"

"Thank you," murmured Hazel pathetically. "I know that it will lighten my lonely life in the days to come to remember that I may reckon always upon so loyal a friend as you."

Then the carriage stopped.

Hazel Lostwithiel's sweet pale face flushed and then paled again.

"Are we—in this Grayladies?" she cried, with something like an accent of terror in her voice.

"No," Valentine told her cheerily; "this is Gwynne—the beginning of the village. I must get out here, you know—my own home is close by. Such a quaint red-brick old house it is. You must come and see it some day, Miss Lostwithiel—will you?"

He alighted somewhat hastily as he spoke, perhaps to avoid meeting again the unobtrusive pathos of those sweet dark eyes, and remained standing a moment or two by the carriage door, looking thoughtfully down the gusty village road, quite dark now.

"We shall meet very soon again, of course," he said, "because business takes me to Grayladies, you know, nearly every day in the week. There is always a great deal there to be attended to, Miss Lostwithiel."

Hazel only shivered in her corner.

"Good-night!" said Valentine then, shutting the door with a quick deft hand.

"Good-night," replied Hazel mournfully; "I did not know that I was to go on to Grayladies—alone."

Valentine stood bareheaded, looking at the ground; and the old yellow chariot of the Lostwithiels rolled heavily on its way to Grayladies.

"Oh, my father," cried the girl, wringing her hands very piteously now that she was alone once more with the ghosts and shadows of the dead and gone years, "why did you leave me so cruel a task to perform! A task so hard—so bitter! Why did you bind me by a vow so unnatural—a vow that may prove beyond my strength to keep! I might have been happy in time at Grayladies, if only—if only—"

Her voice died away in accents of sheer despair. She bowed her head meekly, and prayed for strength to endure.

Within half-an-hour after losing sight of Valentine Chester, Sir Mordred's young daughter stood upon the threshold of her dreary inheritance.

It was good old Mrs. Comfort—the sole retainer of the dreadful past, who had remained faithful in the service of Lady Lucilla, and who by this time had got to be more like a friend than a servant to her lonely and aged mistress—it was Mrs. Comfort who met the young girl in the great arched doorway, and, with homeliest words of greeting, bade her welcome to Grayladies.

"I am the housekeeper and everything in chief, my dear," explained Mrs. Comfort with gentle familiarity. "And if I offend, you must pardon an old body like me, my dearie, because I know your handsome young father so well. 'Tis a right good sight to see you at the poor forlorn old place—that it is, my dear."

And then the old servant, with a scared and palling countenance, fell back a step and leaned against the wall, breathing hard.

"Mercy on us!" she whispered. "How very like—how terribly like—to be sure! What can be the meaning of so strange a thing!"

"You are more than kind," returned Hazel Lostwithiel, absently, in sweet tremulous tones hardly above a murmur, and apparently not quick to perceive Mrs. Comfort's extraordinary behaviour. "And now will you please take me to my grandmother? I am—so—so tired."

"Poor child!" said the housekeeper, recovering herself, and drawing a huge dingy curtain of claret-coloured cloth over the hall-door and preparing to lead the way—"poor child, I have no doubt you are tired—you look it, dearie, you look it. However, come with me, Miss Lost-

withiel. Lady Lucilla is waiting for you in the tower room."

Hazel's cold heart sank, and she nearly cried out in her pain and fear.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO HAZELS.

ALL the same, Hazel Lostwithiel followed her old guide collectedly through the immense chilly hall, with its murky pictures and spectral adornments—the great shadowy hall which somehow seemed so familiar to the girl, doubtless from the fact of her having heard her father describe it sometimes, when he had been in the mood to speak of the past and of Grayladies, and to exhibit to his daughter the numerous sketches he had made of the mansion and its grounds in the careless days of his youth—and up the spacious, age-blackened staircase to the apartment of Lady Lucilla Lostwithiel.

Even the panelled corridor, with its groined roof, its many carved doors, now locked and forlorn-looking, its dusky shelves of priceless china, all seemed like old familiar friends to the senses of Hazel Lostwithiel.

She glanced around her with a soft involuntary sigh. It was something to be at home—the home of her forefathers—at last!

"This is her ladyship's own room," whispered Mrs. Comfort, opening the massive door of the tower-chamber; and, having done this, the good dame retired noiselessly; once more muttering to herself as she went—

"How like, how terribly like! Poor Lady Lucilla!"

An aged woman, with a haggard, wan face lined with remorse, and restless, hunted-looking eyes, dressed severely in a long trailing plain black gown, with lawn at her throat and wrists, rose from her low seat by the fireside, as Hazel Lostwithiel, trembling exceedingly, entered that haunted room.

The wind was wailing and sobbing outside, and singing the loose ivy-sprays against the mullioned lattice.

The pine logs crackled upon the wide monastic hearth, and lit up fitfully the curious Gothic moulding which embellished that yawning fireplace in the tower-room.

With a gesture of intense and pathetic yearning the elder woman had extended her arms to the younger, who was advancing over the threshold with faltering steps to meet gladly that hungry embrace; when Lady Lucilla, with something like a shriek of despair, recoiled suddenly, and, throwing her long thin arms aloft, thrust her fingers into the very roots of her dead-gray hair.

Her wild eyes seemed very starting from their sockets; her jaw had dropped, corpse-like; and the power of speech was gone.

Before Hazel Lostwithiel could spring forward to prevent the catastrophe, her grandmother had fallen senseless on the floor at her feet—just indeed where she had lain prone, one night some twenty years previously, when Sir Mordred the accuser had appeared there before his mother, to utter his last farewell.

And now, twenty years afterwards, in the living form of Sir Mordred Lostwithiel's young daughter, the guilty conscience of Lady Lucilla told her that she beheld the ghost of dead Hazel Hope!

Not until three whole days had elapsed since the evening of Hazel Lostwithiel's arrival at Grayladies, was Lady Lucilla well enough to meet her granddaughter again.

Her strength had failed her utterly—the shock had laid her low indeed.

Faithful Mrs. Comfort, who waited untiringly upon the stricken woman, came down on the second day shaking her head dismally.

"I'm sorely afraid that her ladyship will not hold out much longer, Miss Lostwithiel, my dear," the good old woman said. "Her troubles in this sad world will soon be over, I'm thinking. Sad indeed as it would be to see her go, the dear Lord knows that it would be a blessed release!"

Hazel Lostwithiel smote her hands together. The tears started into her beautiful dark eyes. "But why do you not send for a doctor, Mrs. Comfort?" she cried. "It is wrong—wicked—to let her sink—fade away—"

"My dear young lady," put in Mrs. Comfort impressively, "no mortal doctor in this world can do her any good. She knows it. Mr. Valentine Chester knows it. We all know it, dearie."

"You see, she has been dying slowly of a broken heart for the last twenty years, as you may say, and the only wonder is that her strength has lasted her as long as it has done."

"The other night, you know, the first sight of you, my child, up yonder in that room of hers was somehow too much for her. In some way or other, I take it, you reminded her too painfully of your poor dear father, Sir Mordred, and—and—or—"

The ancient housekeeper paused, and looked very troubledly at Hazel Lostwithiel.

"Well?" was all the young girl said, with pale averted face.

"And," continued Mrs. Comfort, feeling altogether perplexed and bewildered, "you must also, I fancy, Miss Lostwithiel, in some curious unexpected way or other, have reminded her ladyship of—of Hazel Hope. Did you, I wonder, dearie, ever hear tell of Hazel Hope?"

"Yes," answered the girl softly; "Sir Mordred, my father, you know, called me after Hazel Hope."

"I was greatly struck myself the other evening when you arrived here," explained Mrs. Comfort meditatively, "with—with the queer sort o' likeness which I seemed to see all at once in you, Miss Lostwithiel—a likeness, I mean, to—that other whose name you bear."

"Your hair is dark and soft like hers was; and so are your eyes. But there, of course, it must be all fancy—an impossible pack o' nonsense surely," added this privileged old domestic, rubbing her wrinkled forehead in her perplexity with one of her white-satin cap strings, "because—because, in the first place, Miss Lostwithiel, you never even saw poor Hazel Hope. How could you?"

Hazel Lostwithiel was very pale now.

There was a strange wistful shadow, half fear, half pain, in those tragic, sorrowful eyes of hers.

"How could I? You are right," she said hurriedly, her head still turned aside. "Hazel Hope was dead before I was born. At least, I—I have heard so—that is all."

"True enough, my dear," said the old woman sadly, more ill at ease than ever as she looked again curiously at Hazel Lostwithiel. And then Mrs. Comfort changed the subject abruptly, and spoke of Valentine Chester.

"Ah, he is an upright good sort of gentleman, he is," she said, the affectionate tears brimming in her eyes. "The way he looks after this poor old place and everything belonging to it, why it is something wonderful."

"He is like a son, is Mr. Valentine, to the poor lady upstairs, as anyone in Gwynne would tell you, Miss Lostwithiel, as well as me. What she would have done without him, and his good father before him—there, the dear Lord only knows, for I don't," said Mrs. Comfort conclusively.

Late in the afternoon, as it happened, Valentine himself came to Grayladies.

Having heard in the village that Lady Lucilla was ailing more than usual, he had called in at the house to make his own personal inquiries, he said.

Hazel went to him in the library; a lofty, silent, mournful-looking place, with two long narrow windows—the crest of the Lostwithiels being emblazoned on the upper panes—opening out upon the deserted gardens.

It was the only downstairs apartment ever used now by Lady Lucilla.

Mr. Chester was unwontedly quiet at first—Hazel herself nervous and shy.

He inquired very kindly after the health of Lady Lucilla; and the girl, with drooped eyes and quivering voice, repeated to him what Mrs. Comfort had said to her about the matter in the morning.

Valentine looked grave.

"Alas, if he did but know that it was I who had wrought the mischief!" she thought, with a

passionate longing in her aching heart to tell him then and there the secret of her life—"if he did but know—if he did but know everything—would he ever speak to me again, I wonder, ever let me touch again his strong true hand, notwithstanding that noble promise of his to stand by the Lostwithiels to the last?"

"He is so honourable and straightforward; so brave and good; and yet he is my grandmother's friend! So perhaps, after all, he would admit the justification—"

"Are you not charmed, Miss Lostwithiel, with the beauty and antiquity of Grayladies?" spoke Valentine, anxious, if possible, to banish the brooding shadow from the beautiful young face, so young indeed, but so thoughtful beyond its years. "Do you know, whenever I am here, I invariably catch myself humming that quaint old ditty about 'the monks and nuns of the olden time.' Do you know it? No! Well, I dare say not. I used to hear my father sing it when I was a lad. But then I have always been given to understand that the nuns of Grayladies were very pious women, almost saints on earth, and entirely *sans reproche*."

"The poor in Gwynne, I have heard, used to bless their very name. By some accident or other an abbess of their order lies buried in Gwynne churchyard, and the tombstone bears the following quaint inscription:

'God bless the holy Sisters of Grayladies.'

"You shall see it for yourself, Miss Lostwithiel, when you come to pay me your promised visit at that queer old red-brick house of mine in the village."

It seemed to Valentine Chester that he was so much older than Hazel Lostwithiel, older in all things—old enough almost to have been her father or guardian—that it behoved him as it were to assume towards her a sort of protecting and admonitory tone in his dealings and converse with her.

Yes, so many years stretched between them—so many years!

It was not as though he were still in the first flush of youth. He was thirty-five—she eighteen.

The world therefore, he told himself a little bitterly, could never cavil at his interest in Sir Mordred Lostwithiel's beautiful young daughter.

"I do not think I ever promised that, did I?" said Hazel, with her sweet, serious smile, in response to his last assertion. "Besides, you are forgetting that I do not at present know Mrs. Chester; though I should indeed be very glad if she would call on me soon—"

"My mother," he put in gravely, "has been dead this many a long year now."

"I—I think I meant your wife," explained Hazel, confused rather, a lovely damask red swiftly dyeing her face and brow.

"My wife—my wife! What wife! I have no wife," quoted Valentine, laughing. "In Gwynne, I assure you, Miss Lostwithiel, I am regarded as a confirmed, a most incorrigible bachelor. If we cannot prevail on Lady Lucilla to bring you to see me, we must see what can be done with Mrs. Comfort, you know."

"Thank you," said Hazel, simply but earnestly. "You are very good to me, Mr. Chester."

"And you will come?" he smiled.

"Yes—I will," she said.

Before he took his departure he explained to Sir Mordred's daughter that on the very first day she might feel equal to a rather severe arithmetical ordeal, he wished her with himself to go through the accounts.

It was Lady Lucilla's wish likewise.

As Sir Mordred's only child, she was the real mistress of Grayladies, and a great heiress into the bargain.

Sir Mordred's solicitor in London had written to Valentine Chester; and the two men had arranged to hold an interview together, touching the fortune of Hazel Lostwithiel.

It was imperative, Valentine said brightly, that Miss Lostwithiel should learn and understand clearly how business matters at Grayladies had been progressing under the stewardship which he had taken over as it were from his late father.

"But I would infinitely rather go on leaving

everything to you, as before—if—if you don't mind," said Hazel, doubtfully; not quite comprehending, and rather alarmed at, the prospect he conjured up.

"So you shall," he told her smiling, "when once you have seen my ledgers. Believe me, I will make it all plain and easy to you; and I give you my word, too, Miss Lostwithiel, that you shall not be bored unnecessarily. Cannot you trust yourself in my hands?"

When he was gone Hazel remembered that she had actually laughed twice during the last half hour, and almost forgot, in thinking of Valentine's goodness and nobility, that her soul was weighted with a terrible secret care, and that her grandmother was lying perhaps in the shadow of death.

He was gone; and the gloom of Grayladies, thought Hazel Lostwithiel, seemed somehow gloomier and more oppressive than ever!

That same day, in the gusty March eventide, when Lady Lucilla had sunk into a restful doze, Mrs. Comfort, at the request of her young mistress, accompanied Hazel all over the great lonely house, from its loftiest garret to its nethermost cellar.

"I have a fancy to go," the girl said feverishly. "I cannot rest until I have been."

So Mrs. Comfort, after much diligent rummaging in out-of-the-way forgotten corners, produced the indispensable keys, and together the pair set off.

The rooms in the west corridor which the careful old housekeeper had prepared for the reception of Miss Lostwithiel were pleasantly and warmly furnished, commanding a fair view of the park and Gwynne country-side beyond it, with the swift-flowing river in the blue-misted distance dividing the beautiful landscape.

But all those many other disused rooms at Grayladies, with their dulled antique furniture and dusty moth-eaten tapestries, were dreary and desolate-looking in the extreme, so indelible seemed the traces of wreck and decay which time had stamped upon them all.

Now and then, as the great creaking doors, almost black with age, swung back upon their rusty hinges, and a gleam of light darted fantastically into the mazes of shadow beyond, a spider on the ceiling would drop like a nut to the floor, or a huge white moth come fluttering out blindly from the tapestry about the shuttered windows.

Sometimes a ghostly curtain would sway in the sudden draught, as though some grisly shape or other were lurking and moving behind its folds, or a mouse scamper boldly across their very feet to squeak defiance at the intruders from behind the mouldering wainscot.

The tall-backed chairs, with their fantastic carving, looked like gnomes or goblins in the deep, voiceless gloom.

The bedsteads and their hangings were disagreeably suggestive to Hazel of some she had once read about in a German legend of a haunted castle on the terrible Brocken.

The young girl shuddered.

"Ah yes," whispered Mrs. Comfort, with a glance half fearful over her shoulder, and then holding a flickering light high above her stiff white cap, "it is all very dreary and forlorn, isn't it, dearie? They smell like the grave, these rooms, don't they? But then, as I am always saying to myself, what is one poor body with one pair of hands like me to do all alone in a great rambling place like this!"

"I open the windows whenever the sun shines, and give a dust to the furniture whenever I can make time."

"As for lighting a bit o' fire in any one of them great caverny fire-places, why, you cannot do it, Miss Lostwithiel, to save your life. For the smoke comes a-curling down the chimney again just enough to suffocate you, and won't go up nowhere or nobow if you stand there with the bellows all day."

"As I was saying, there's no soul in the house but me to do anything and everything, with old John Silvester to look after things out-of-doors—him, you know, Miss Lostwithiel, as drove you from the station—and I, you see, my dear, ain't so young and strong as I was, so how can you

wonder at it!" demanded poor old Mrs. Comfort rather hazily.

"Ah, yes," said Hazel thoughtfully. "I can understand how different it all was—once!"

"And here," breathed the old housekeeper, by-and-by, beginning to pale and tremble a little, as she cautiously unlocked and pushed open the narrow door of a small three-cornered chamber at the extremity of the chilly east corridor, "and here is—the bed-chamber that was Hazel Hope's. Do not go in, Miss Lostwithiel, don't go in, for mercy's sake!" gasped Mrs. Comfort. "Look yonder there at that nasty beady-eyed moth on the bolster! 'Tis a sign of death always—there's murder in the air—come away, child, come away!"

But Hazel, mutely turning on the frightened old woman the passionate sorrow of her tragic eyes, reverently bowed her soft dark head and entered that little room alone.

A pane in the small lattice was broken; an ivy-bough had crawled in. The plaster was dropping from the damp walls and ceiling; the lowly trundle bed and rush-bottomed chair stood exactly where Hazel Hope herself had left them on that night of her vanishing from Grayladies.

Hazel Lostwithiel, with a long quivering sigh, bent down and pressed her lips to the mildewed coverlet.

"Miss Lostwithiel!" ejaculated the housekeeper, aghast, as she stood there quaking in the doorway ready for flight if need should arise.

Sir Mordred's daughter came out then, looking the chamber door softly with her own little hands.

"My father loved Hazel Hope, remember," she said dreamily, "and both of them are dead now."

Mrs. Comfort shook her old head solemnly. She was feeling uncomfortably bewildered again.

And the sensation worried her somehow.

"I wonder," ruminated the trusty old servant, with a sidelong glance at the pensive profile of Hazel Lostwithiel—"I wonder whether she knows who it was that killed the other Hazel—Hazel Hope!"

(To be continued.)

TWO MARRIAGES.

—101—

CHAPTER XIX.—(continued.)

"I SAY, stranger," said the American presently, with very little nasal twang, "can you give me a light? I'm blessed if I've got a fume about me!" fumbling in his pocket.

Gilbert politely handed over a neat little silver box, and the other took half its contents with the utmost calmness, and stuffed them into his waistcoat-pocket, merely saying,—

"That will do, stranger; thanks. I'll do as much for you another time! Can you tell me if there's a train back to Hillford before three o'clock this afternoon?"

"Yes; there's one—if you mean from the Junction—at a quarter past two."

"Thanks; I'll just make a note of that!" fumbling in his many pockets; and, as he fumbled, a pretty little lady's purse dropped out upon the floor of the railway carriage. It was the facsimile of Georgie's—silver and tortoiseshell.

This Gilbert noticed with a violent start, but, of course, stifling suspicion ruthlessly—there were lots of the same in existence; but what a queer thing for this coarse-looking, dissipated fellow to possess such a dainty little article!

"I see you're admiring my purse, stranger," he said, stooping and picking it up with studied deliberation; "it's a pretty little toy," tossing it carelessly up and down in his hand, and eyeing Gilbert as he spoke, "and it was given to me by a very pretty girl."

Mr. Vernon was on the eve of saying "that he did not believe any pretty girl would have been such a fool," for there was something that was irritating and offensive in the other's looks, but on second thoughts he held his tongue, and merely

contented himself with a glance of contemptuous incredulity.

At the next station he got out, telling himself he did not care if he never saw his fellow-traveller again. He was antagonistic to him, from the crown of his hat to the soles of his boots; and, although once upon a time he might have been a gentleman, yet there was but little of the gentleman about him now—he looked a regular bad lot, with his bloodshot eyes and shaky hands.

Then he quickly dismissed him from his mind, and set about having his horses taken out of their box with due care, and presently mounting one of them he trotted off to the meet, having entirely dismissed the American from his mind. Needless to add that it never occurred to him to connect this questionable, unpleasant-looking stranger in any way with Georgie or Georgie's indisposition—though she was very much in his thoughts as he trotted through the lanes that soft December morning.

The next afternoon Mr. Vernon was at home once more, just in time to be too late for lunch.

"How is Georgie?" was his first question, as Lizzie rose eagerly to greet him.

"Oh, she's seemingly all right again. After you left yesterday morning she came down and went out."

"Went out!" he echoed in amazement.

"Yes, and she is out again now."

There is a significance in the low tones that does not escape him.

"And where, in the name of madness—driving?"

"No; walking. I fancy she has gone towards the village. In short, my dear, dear Gilbert, brace yourself for a shock. I have positive proof that she has gone to meet—a man. Don't look so angry, but listen to me. Here, I picked this up on the stairs yesterday. It was well none of the servants happened to find it," holding towards him a half-sheet of paper in a mysterious manner.

"What is it? What do you mean?" he said, quickly, nearly snatching it from her, and running his eyes over the contents, which was written in a bold, square hand, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR G—,

"Meet me in the summer-house at the end of tennis ground, at two sharp."

"P. R."

For some seconds Mr. Vernon stood stock-still, gazing at the paper in his hand as if it were a scorpion. Then he walked over and dropped it into the fire, where in a moment it was in a flame, greatly to Miss Fane's annoyance. She would have liked to have kept the little note, and now it was gone for ever. She showed her dissatisfaction in her face, as she turned to her cousin, and said, pointedly,—

"And you trust her still?"

"I trust her always," he returned, looking into her eyes with brave defiance.

"Then I have no pity for you, Gilbert, whatever happens. All I can say is that you are a credulous, weak-minded, blind—wilfully blind—fool."

Miss Fane's anger got the upper hand of her prudence for once. She spoke in haste—in a towering passion—and subsequently, when her passion cooled, repented at her leisure.

She was a little afraid of Gilbert; and the look he had given her as he rang the bell and ordered lunch, and subsequently left the room, made her sorry she had spoken.

"Why should she meddle?" she asked herself, angrily. "He will find her out for himself."

Her words were prophetic. After lunch—which was only the name of the thing, as far as he was concerned—he went out with the intention of coming to the bottom of this mystery, and knowing the worst at once—some poor relation of Georgie's that she was reluctant to parade before Lizzie's cool satirical eyes.

But Georgie's relations were his, and if he—it was a man—this uncle or brother-in-law or cousin of hers wanted a helping hand he was ready to extend it with all the pleasure in life.

It was nearly three o'clock when he reached the summer-house—a room in the garden, like a

cottage, thatched and covered with creepers. It had real windows, a door, a fireplace, and was furnished with tables and chairs.

In summer it was the invariable resort for afternoon tea, but in the winter it was entirely deserted. It was not known as a summer-house, but went by the name of the garden-room.

He was not too late after all. He heard voices distinctly as he came across a grass slope—voices in the bass, voices in the treble, voices mingled in anger and expostulation.

He stooped and looked in at the window through the surrounding ivy, and saw Georgie standing sideways to him, wrapped in a shawl, with a fur cap on her head; and sitting down, chewing a toothpick, his elbows on the tables, in the most free and easy attitude, lounged the American, his fellow-traveller.

Gilbert was going to rush in and expel him, neck-and-crop, when one or two words restrained him, and held him a fixture to the spot.

"Look here," he bawled, "there's no use in your throwing yourself into fits and kicking up tantrums, Mrs. Blaine. You have fretted away half your looks as it is. You know my terms, and this is our last interview. You know my offer, take it or leave it; I repeat it again. I'm willing to resign all claim to you for ever, and no one shall know that you are my lawful wife, I'll swear, provided you make me over, in consideration of the loss of such a handsome girl as yourself, the full interest of your uncle's money. You can't touch the principal, I find, for I went to look yesterday morning; but the interest is a tidy sum, and five thousand pounds a-year, paid quarterly, for life, is a good thing, and not a bad annuity for your attached husband, Peter Blaine. You can make up whatever story you like for the other fellow, and you may stay with him and your kids on those terms; otherwise, Mrs. B., you are too valuable a property to be left behind, and you come along to-morrow with me."

"Wretch," cried Georgie, after a moment's pause, "and say I am your lawful wife!"

"Yes, my dear; I have it all here, fair and square," tapping his breast pocket.

"You would sell your honour and mine! You would sell me for a sum of money!"

"To be sure, my beautiful! and you are a fool not to jump at my offer—Vernon is rich."

"I have been so wicked," she gasped, with a white drawn face, now leaning her hands on the back of a chair to support her trembling body, "as for two whole days to be terribly tempted to take your offer, and to stay, but I have had my eyes opened in time. Heretofore I have brought no shame or disgrace upon my boys. What I have done I did in ignorance—to barter away the poor remains of my good name and theirs for a few months' happiness, if it would be happiness, carrying such a guilty secret in my bosom! No. I am the most miserable woman on the face of this earth, but I have sufficient strength to resist that temptation, thank Heaven for it. As to going away, go I must, though it will nearly kill me. I go for their sakes. As to going with you, as to be your wife, you hateful, wicked schemer, you plotter against the happiness of inoffensive people, you intriguer, who married a foolish girl to seize all the old man's money, the very sight of you makes me shudder, the very thought of you makes me sick! Hear me," raising her hand, "hear me once for all! Do not drive me too far. Rather than go with you I would die. I have nothing to live for now. Take care, Peter, desperate women have been known to do desperate deeds. Supposing I were to kill you!"

For an answer Peter rose lazily, and made a sudden grab at her shawl. She struggled violently to free herself. In the struggle a chair was upset, and Mr. Blaine unexpectedly found himself flung to the other end of the apartment.

When he had recovered from this shock to his nerves and his self-respect he turned, and found himself face to face with Mr. Vernon, who had been listening to every word of the foregoing conversation, and not believing his ears he had stood listening, at first unable to move when he had heard Georgie, his wife, coolly addressed as Mrs. Blaine. He had felt the drops of perspiration come out upon his forehead. He had felt each

beat of his heart as if it were going to burst. He had been obliged to lean against the wall for mere support. He had told himself that he was either going mad or his wife had lost her reason. He had been spellbound—unable to move—until he had seen this fierce, dissipated-looking ruffian dare to lay hands on her, and then he scarcely knew what he was doing. Then he had interfered with the result we have described. He stood in the middle of the garden-house between the pair—the sullen, scowling man and the white and trembling woman, and said,—

"What is this—what do you mean, you scoundrel!"

"Scoundrel yourself! Don't you dare to lay a finger on that lady," retorted Mr. Blaine, pulling himself together, mentally and bodily. "She's my wife."

"Your what!"

"I told you already. She won't deny it. Here, you can see her marriage lines if you like."

"Hand them over," returned Gilbert, laconically.

"Fair play, you know," tendering a long and rather greasy scrap of paper. "No tearing up, you know."

Gilbert seized the certificate and looked at it. There it was. He was a magistrate himself. It was perfectly formal, and declared the legal marriage of Peter Blaine, bachelor, and Georgina Grey, spinster, on a certain day, more than seven years back, in Portsmouth town. The very letters seemed to flame before his eyes, the paper to scorch his hand. His hand trembled as if he had the palsy as he held back the certificate towards Georgie, and said, in a strange, mechanical voice,—

"Is this true?"

"Yes," she faltered, with a sob; "only too true."

"You are satisfied now, I hope!" said Mr. Blaine, ironically. "You see for yourself she is my wife all these years, and nothing to you but—"

"Stop! Say another word, and I'll knock your teeth down your throat. I'll half kill you, you scoundrel."

"The two if you are inclined for murder. I see you heard what she said just now!"

"If she is really your—your wife, why did you not claim her! How came she to marry me! Explain that."

"That's easily explained. She and all my friends were told that I was dead. I've just made her an offer, and now I'll make the same to you. If you will keep your hands off me, young man, I'll tell you the whole story from first to last, and you shall judge for yourself."

"Gilbert, Gilbert, hear me first," implored Georgie. "I am not the gentle creature you think me. I was under a vow." She looked at him wildly. She was white and trembling.

"You shall tell me all by-and-by," he returned in a tone that froze her. "Let Mr. Blaine—I think is his name—speak first."

His calmness was appalling. He wondered at himself. He felt as if every human feeling in his breast—faith, hope, love, charity, pity, anger, grief—were dead; that his very heart had been turned into stone.

Georgie, his wife—the simple little girl he married four years ago—not his wife at all, but the wife of this evil-faced, blustering, elderly Yankee!

CHAPTER XX.

"I'll tell you the whole story, and make a clean breast of everything, as if that was a confessional," said Mr. Blaine, once more seating himself at the table, and calmly surveying his two auditors.

Georgie, who was sitting in the background with her face buried in her hands, and Gilbert, who remained standing, but who now took a chair so placed that he could see both Mr. and Mrs. Blaine.

"Go on, go on!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "Go on, and get it over, for mercy sake."

"Well, I won't be long about it, you bet. Her," nodding his head towards Georgie,

"mother and sister and she lived close to my people at Southsea. My father was a well-known naval officer. We are of ancient family—gentry, though I don't look like it now, been knocking about in all kinds of queer places" here Gilbert made an impatient movement of his chair. "Yes, yes, I'm going on. I was the only son—and a prodigal. I spent a pile of money. I never could stick at anything—never do any good—never succeed in anything but making dollars fly! I was set up several times—always came back like a bad shilling. The very last time my case was desperate. My father would not give me a penny, but he gave me notice to quit; and at the eleventh hour, my sister, Mrs. Bint, came to my rescue with a secret, and now what I tell you two is sacred. I'm telling you all, as if I was on oath. I keep nothing from you, so that you can take your course as you please afterwards. Well, Bint is a lawyer, his wife worms his secrets from him sometimes, and this she passed on to me as worth eighty thousand pounds. Old George Harvey, a half-cracked miser, had left every penny to the youngest Miss Grey, and no one knew this but Bint, Mrs. Bint, Mr. Harvey and I."

Georgie dropped the hands that shrouded her eyes.

"So that was why you married me!" she burst out. "Oh! I might have guessed it!"

"Don't interrupt, if you please, m's'am, and you will hear all. The youngest Miss Grey was a mere chit—a child, thin, and shy, and gawky; she had never spoken to a man before in her life. I made the running. I used to be very successful with the fair sex. I persuaded her—talked her over. She was like wax in my hands. She agreed on the spur of the moment to bind herself to me for life, for fear of our being parted by our friends, and the day I sailed I took her to the registry-office, and married her hard and fast. I drove her home there and then, thinking how I had made sure of the legacy, left her at her own gate, and I never saw her again till a few days ago. Well, old Harvey died, and no will was found—a fearful sell for me—and gradually I lost sight of Georgie. I ceased to write; finally, I was supposed to be blown up in a steam-boat, nearly six years ago. I never took the trouble to contradict the matter; I had no objection to a new name. I had nearly forgotten the episode at Portsmouth, when I saw the 'great Harvey will case' in the paper. It then flashed into my mind that the heiress was my wife. I came home post haste, and found her married to a rich young country gentleman—named Vernon—as happy as the day was long, the mother of two children, and not at all pleased to see husband No. 1. Understand me, Mr. Vernon," suddenly changing his voice, and leaning across the table, "I do not want my wife; she is really yours, save in the eye of the law. No one is aware of the facts," he related, "except we three. I'll tear up the certificate, and disappear in earnest, if you will give me the prize for which I married her—Mr. Harvey's fortune!"

"Scoundrel!" cried Gilbert, rising. "Does such another cool-blooded villain as yourself walk the earth? Is it not enough that you have destroyed our home, but that you would tempt us as a very fiend! You have laid your black heart bare to the very core for nothing! Begone!"—dashing back the door so wide that it strained its very hinges. "Out of my sight and begone quickly, ere I lose all control over myself, and half kill you, as you deserve!"—and Mr. Blaine, like a whipped cur—cowed by the other's low-toned vehemence—rose sullenly, put his hands in his pockets, and actually slunk out.

When he had gone—gone altogether out of sight—his host closed the door, and, drawing a chair close up to the table, leant with his arms upon it and his head on them.

What was this awful thing that had happened to him—to her who was the apple of his eye—to his house—his home—his children! As yet his mind was unable fully to grasp the whole magnitude of the situation; but bit by bit black thoughts cropped up.

She was not his wife!—his children were nameless—his name would be in everyone's

mouth, and he who had ever held his head so high would find it brought low indeed!

A kind of sob escaped him as one more agonising conviction came home to him after another; and then someone—it was she, who came, as it were, creeping to his feet and knelt there; her hat had fallen off, her shawl dropped from her shoulders, her hand laid timidly on his arm.

"Gilbert," she whispered, in heart-wrung accents, "I am the most miserable woman that ever was born! But oh! believe me, I am not guilty! I have brought ruin on you—on my children—all unconsciously! And, oh! it were well for them and for me that I were dead!" Her voice seemed to rouse him from his lethargy of wretchedness.

"Georgie," he said, at last, raising his head and looking at her steadily, "why did you never tell me? Why did you keep this thing from me—that you had been another man's wife, and as you believed a widow?" gazing at her in haggard misery.

"I was bound by a vow. His sister swore me to secrecy. After his death it did not seem to matter then—no one cared. You saw Grace Blaine here—it was she; and it is only within a month I have been released from my promise—set free by a letter found after her death. She tells me in this letter to keep the secret always; that it is a shame to have ever listened to her brother. Oh!" throwing out her arms wildly, "do I not know that now! What was I then but a child—an infatuated imbecile child? How dearly, dearly I am to pay for my folly!" burying her face in her hands and breaking into a paroxysm of sobs—her whole frame quivering with anguish.

Gilbert laid his hand upon her shoulder; he was gradually recovering from the first shock to realize that he was not the only sufferer.

He put his arm round her waist and raised her gently and placed her in a chair.

After a little her sobs ceased. She drew away her hands and looked at him, trembling exceedingly.

"Gilbert, is it a dream—a fearful dream—dearest? Gilbert, tell me that it is nothing but a dream! It is not true that that man has come to life to claim me—to take me away from you, my husband—from my home and children! It is not true! My mind has been deranged—I have fancied it all, have I not?"

Her voice sank into accents of anxious entreaty, her eyes looked into his piteously, terror in her glance.

Gilbert bowed his head upon his arms, and made no answer for fully five minutes. He was fighting a hard battle within himself.

"Why," whispered his heart's inclination, "should he not take that fellow at his word. Destroy the certificate, and let all be as it had been. Why must he with his own hand cut himself adrift from her, for whom he would give his very life. Why deliver her up alone—unprotected—to the mercies of that infamous mercenary ruffian whom the law, by a little slip of paper, made her husband?"

Husband! It was a sacrilege to call him that—he was a mere adventurer, who had gambled with fate for her fortune; whilst he, Gilbert Vernon, was her true husband in the sight of Heaven.

Sooner than resign her, his pretty, innocent Georgie, to this pitiless monster he would see her in her coffin; but the clutches of the law gave a man great power over his wife.

How was she to escape from the greedy grasp that was stretched out for her and her eighty thousand pounds! Oh! that cursed legacy—the cause of all this misery! He and Georgie must part, no matter what it cost them. Even now to caress and console her and kiss away her tears was a sin.

Had ever since creation two miserable people been in such a plight before? What had she done that fate should shatter his home at one blow!

These thoughts flashed like lightning through his brain as he sat with his face resting on his arms; and as he sat he made up his mind, being

ever given to prompt action, that they must get the parting over at once.

To hide Georgie from her lawful owner, who would be lurking in the village ready to come to the Manor and boldly claim her was the first thing to be thought of. Moments were precious—there was no time to lose.

Raising his head he met her eyes eagerly fixed on him.

"Gilbert, have you not thought of something? I know you have," eagerly.

"Yes, I have been thinking hard, and fighting a terrible battle with my own inclinations—a battle for us both! Georgie, darling, we are the victims of circumstances. There is but one way out of this—the right way."

"We"—the words seemed to stick in his throat—"must part! In the eye of the law you are not my wife, though in my heart and mind you are, and none other can or shall ever take your place. The thing is now for you to get away from him; he can come home and claim you, and I am powerless to prevent it—he has the law on his side. I feel as if my brain was on fire!" clenching his hand suddenly against his forehead.

"But the thing to think of now is not so much our own agony of mind, but of a scheme to elude him. To-night you must go—by the seven o'clock train!" hurriedly looking at his watch. "It is now four—in three hours' time I will drive you to the Junction—that will throw him off the scent. I will take no servant. You can catch the up-express to London, and in London you will be easily lost. We will fix on some means of communication, or you can stay with an old family servant of my mother's for the present, until you can get away abroad, or bribe him by your lawyers to return to America—no matter at what cost!"

Georgie listened to this with fixed dilated eyes. She did not interrupt by either word or gesture; but when he had finished speaking she exclaimed, with a bitter cry,—

"In three hours!—and the children!"

"The children must stay here for the present—they are safe enough. It is you I am thinking of; if you are here to-morrow think of the horror, the scandal, of having that man coming up to the Manor! He must be bought off—I see that. I will go to my lawyers to-morrow. Of course, it must all be known in time—such things cannot be kept secret; but if you and I part now, Georgie, miserable as we are, we are blameless!"

"Oh, Gilbert!" she cried, distractedly, "how can we part!—how can you even speak of it? Let us pay him all he wants. What is money? You—you—cannot care for me as I do for you, or you would—"

Here her voice entirely failed her; she rose and threw her arms round him, and clung to him convulsively.

"Gilbert," she cried, "you are not in earnest!"

"Georgie," he said, laying her head on his shoulder, and stroking her tumbled curls, "Dearest—my wife—my life—don't tempt me; it is hard enough without that!" speaking in a husky voice. "That I do love you as my very life I am proving to you now. In the lines you have often heard I can say,—

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."

Let us help one another to do right, whatever comes. The happiness that we might buy now at the price of our good name—at the bidding of the tempter—at the cost of conscience—would not last. It would be only a poor, gilded, pinchbeck thing; that the first storm of adversity would blow away. We have borne great happiness together—let us bravely bear misfortune as well, no matter what happens—no matter how far we are apart. You and I will still be the first in the world to each other—nothing can alter that!" he concluded, in a rapid, broken whisper.

"You are right, Gilbert; you are stronger than I," she murmured. "I will bear it as well as I can. We had better say good-bye here—good-bye, in a sense, for ever!"

Over the bitterness of this farewell we drop a veil. No need to paint a picture of two unhappy young people tasting the cup of keenest mental agony to the very dregs! Their dreary battle has been fought and won.

The good-bye—the real good-bye—was said at last; and Miss Fane, as she stands consumed with curiosity at the library window, is struck by the change in Mr. and Mrs. Vernon's faces as they slowly—oh, with what lagging steps!—walk up the wide entrance.

Gilbert's face is white and stern; he actually looks an older man by years since yesterday; and she—she totters as she walks. Her air is wild, half-distracted—and, oh, how she has been crying!

What has happened? They have undoubtedly had a deadly quarrel. Lizzie's heart leaps high at the thought how soon and when will she hear the particulars.

Very much sooner than she expects. The library door opens, and her cousin comes in alone.

"A fearful thing has happened to us—to me, Lizzie," he began, speaking rapidly, without any preamble. "You are my cousin, and must be told the truth at once. My wife"—(ah, ah! she knew it was about her!)—"when she married me was a widow, as she and everyone supposed. Her husband, who married her when she was a mere child of sixteen at a registry-office and at once deserted her, has returned after seven years, and claims her," he concluded, abruptly, with a kind of hard sob.

He stopped and looked at his cousin in dumb agony for fully sixty seconds. Poor, credulous, foolish young man! He might as well look for sympathy from her as blood from a stone!

"And must she go?" she asked, excitedly, after a long pause.

"Yes, but not with him! He is a wretch, a knave, a swindler, by his own confession, who only married her on the chance of her being her uncle's heiress. Now that she has succeeded to this large fortune he comes to claim her, and boldly and shamelessly avows that it is his only aim—his only attraction!"

"And she is really his wife? Tell me, Gilbert!" excitedly.

"I have told you enough, have I not?" he interrupted, with passionate energy. "Don't you see that I am nearly mad? And she—she, poor girl! is saying good-bye to her children now. She cannot stay here—not another day. I am going away. You will see to the house. It must be shut up. I'll dismiss the servants and send the horses up to Tattersall's, and go abroad. Aunt Charlotte will keep the children."

"Of course. It's fearful; it's like a death," said Miss Fane, at last, "and I'm very sorry for you, Gilbert. I will stay here and do what I can. Shall I go to Georgie?" seeing that he was hurriedly preparing to send off telegrams.

"No, no," quickly. "She cannot see anyone. This has nearly killed her. Leave her alone with them."

At seven o'clock a high half-cart drove away from the side door at the Manor. Only two people were in it—a man, who was driving, wrapped up, and almost indistinguishable in an ulster, with the collar turned up, and beside him sat a lady, also wrapped up, her face entirely hidden by a thick black veil.

No one had witnessed their departure, except the groom who brought round the trap and Redwing, the fastest horse in the Manor stables.

He had a long journey before him that night, and well he accomplished the two-and-twenty miles that lay between Hillford and the Junction.

Swiftly the wheels flew over the hard, frosty road, and swiftly he trotted out, as if he was aware that he was bearing a runaway on the first stage of her journey.

Next morning Mr. Blaine arrived at the Manor almost immediately after breakfast, and asked, in a lordly style, "to see Mr. Vernon."

"Mr. Vernon was not at home," he was informed.

"Then Mrs. Vernon. I must see one or the

other. I don't leave the house otherwise!" he returned, savagely.

"Mr. Vernon will be here at three o'clock; Mrs. Vernon has left home on a visit," said the disgusted footman. "If you have anything very important to say you can see Miss Fane very likely."

"Yes, he would see Miss Fane," and in a few minutes he was admitted into the presence of that thin-lipped, sharp-eyed lady, who was seated over the drawing-room fire chewing the end of her now rather pleasant thoughts. "I suppose you have a guess as to who I am," he said, when the door had closed, assuming a bullying air.

"I really cannot hazard a conjecture!" eying him from head to foot contemptuously. "Do you want Mr. Vernon?"

"No, I want Mrs. Vernon; in fact, Mrs. Blaine, for that's her real name and mine. She must come along with me!"

So that awful-looking man, this half-Yankee, half-seedy gentleman, with the dirty collar and hideous check suit, was Georgie's husband—ugh! And what a contrast to Gilbert!—one so coarse and loud (Peter had not always been so), the other so thoroughly a gentleman. Even when he was in a towering passion he never forgot that. One so good-looking and refined in his person, the other a dissipated, vulgar, red-eyed wretch.

"Well, ma'am," Miss Fane did not relish this brevet rank by any means, "where is she? Tell her that I'm waiting."

"She is not at home; she went away last night!"

"What!" he almost shouted, unprepared for such a hasty flitting. "And where has she gone to? Come now, I must know. The fellow outside said she was gone. I did not believe him."

"I really cannot tell you" (she would have done so with pleasure if she could, but she had no clue whatever; she did not even know that they had driven to the junction, and it was just as well the information had been kept from her).

"Where would she be likely to go? Where has she friends?"

"Hillford or Southsea are the only two places I can suggest," said Miss Fane thoughtfully.

"Not London—eh?"

"No, I don't think she knows anyone there," unintentionally throwing him off the scent; "but Mr. Vernon will be here at three o'clock. Perhaps you had better see him!"

"Not a bad notion. I'll come up here again; and will you please tell him that I must see him? If he is concealing my wife from me it's actionable. You may mention that too. If she thinks to run away from me she's made a great mistake, that I can assure her! She has not the smallest chance of hiding herself from P. Blaine! For if she's above ground, dead or alive, I'll find her, and all the Vernons in Christendom won't be able to stand between her and me; and when I find her I'll settle with her, I promise you!" And with this threat, uttered in a manner that made his ladylike listener shrink back in her chair, he lounged to the door, bestowed on her an easy nod, and went out, slamming it loudly after him.

CHAPTER XXI.

TWENTY o'clock the same day beheld Mr. Blaine walking (not very steadily), up the avenue towards the Manor. He had obviously lunched. There is a vast change in his manners and appearance since we first made his acquaintance nearly eight years ago. He was then, as now, a *maison à la mode*; but then he was prudent, he was guarded, he had some self-esteem; he looked, as far as his outward man went, a gentleman.

Had not his presentable appearance had a great deal to do with his success with that silly little school-girl, Georgie Grey, and others? But now eight years of knocking about the States in the lowest company, eight years of drinking and gambling, had set their mark upon him.

He did not care—he was reckless. All he wanted was this fine, solid, well-secured fortune, and he would be off to the New World, never to

return. He had sunk deeper and deeper into the mire of low living and low company, and now he had given up struggling to appear as if he had any claim to be called a gentleman. In fact, to Georgie and Gilbert Vernon he took a certain fierce delight in showing himself as he was, in his real colours—an unvarnished, unscrupulous, unprincipled, adventurer.

The master of the Manor saw him from the windows of the library whilst he was yet coming up the gravel-walk, and taking his hat he hurried out to meet him. He had an unspeakable aversion to permitting him to darken his doors; what they had to say could as well be said in the open air.

"So you've come back!" said the visitor, hailing him from some distance. "I was just coming up to look for you. You are going out, it seems!"

"I'll walk down to the village if you choose, and hear whatever you have to say," said the other evasively.

"Say! I'll just say my say in three words—where is she?"

"I don't know," replied his companion, firmly. "She is no longer under my roof."

"You don't know!" with a laugh of insulting incredulity. "That's a likely tale. You have taken her away and hid her. Very nice doings, Mr. Vernon, very nice; but I'll have the law of you, you will see."

"You can have as much law as you like; but you will be no better off than you are now. She left my house yesterday, and I purposely avoided knowing her destination, because"—looking him doggedly in the face—"I knew you would come here to ask where she was, and I could honestly say I don't know. She has got clear away, I know that much, and it's the only comfort I have in this whole hideous business. If she is lost to me she is equally lost to you."

Mr. Blaine stopped suddenly in the avenue, his face working convulsively with fury. He looked as if he was on the point of striking his companion; but a lively recollection of the other's muscular arms and hard knuckles presented themselves formidably before his mind's eye.

So engrossed was he that he did not notice a dainty-looking maid-servant pass by; but she had noticed him. She stopped when she had gone a few yards, and looked after him with a face from which every trace of colour had fled.

He had not recognised his former sweetheart, Mary Todd. He was too furious to see anything but the young man before him; but she had sharp eyes—eyes that could scarcely believe the evidence of their own senses as they so unexpectedly fell on Peter Blaine. But, oh, how altered!

"Never mind—never mind!" cried Peter, hoarsely, dropping his half up-lifted arm. "I'll be even with you both! I'll find her yet—I swear I will!"

"It is not her you care a button about, it's the money, so you told us yesterday. Listen to me, seriously, I am going to make you an offer in her name."

"Oh! you are, are you? Very polite of you indeed," with ferocious sarcasm, and an unwinking stare.

"It is this—what sum will you take to engage never, as long as you live, to see her or molest her? Name your price," returning the stare with piercing, scornful eyes.

"Ah—ah! you are coming round, I see, though when I talked of this yesterday you were ready to knock me down."

"And so I am now if you dare to bring my name into it. I merely am acting for her—as her friend."

"Oh! her friend!"

"She and I have parted, but, all the same, the very mention of your name makes me shudder. I cannot bear to think of you tracking and tracing and hunting her down, making her unhappy lot still worse."

"Oh! no, I daresay not. This is a pretty way to talk to a girl's husband, I must say. Well, since you are so anxious, I'll give up all claim on her affection, I'll promise never to see her again, provided I am allowed the handling of old Harvey's fortune."

"What, the whole of it?"

"Yes, the whole of it. There are my terms for you. You can think them over, and let her know."

"Well, I have nothing to do with it, but there is the address of her lawyers. You can see them if you like, but I tell you beforehand your price is out of the question—they will not listen to it."

"I don't care a fig for lawyers. I'll find her for myself, and no thanks to you or any of them. I've a good notion I can catch her before long. Well, there's no use you're coming any further. Here is the gate, I'll not trouble you for your escort any longer. Good-day to you."

So saying he plunged his hands deep down into his pockets, and hurried away towards Hillford at a much quicker pace than he had quitted it. He was not a bad amateur detective in his way, and could put two and two together as well as most people. He rather prided himself on his sharpness—even among those very sharp folk the Americans—and he rather enjoyed the notion of running a trail that would be not only exciting and remunerative, but that would drive that black-looking chap he had just parted with into a state of distraction. He would put the screw on him tightly, he would catch and punish Georgie, and he would collar the coin. Meanwhile he must keep cool—meaning that he must keep sober—he had too much at stake to be able to play the fool.

He asked a few careless, clever questions in the village; he discovered that Redwing, the best horse up at the Manor, had been down at the forge that afternoon, had lost a hind shoe, and done a long journey the previous night to the Junction.

Here he had the end of the clue at once. They thought to double and throw him off the track. She had gone to London, and alone—no use in his staying down at Hillford village. He would travel up by the night-express, confer with a detective with whom he had had dealings in days of yore, and set the matter in train at once.

Leaving him in pursuit, we follow the fortunes of Georgie, who journeyed alone up to London, resolved to seek shelter at her dressmaker's, in preference to going to an hotel. It had been agreed between her and Gilbert that she would not tell him her whereabouts at first, but would write. There was no fear of anything happening to her, she assured him through the railway carriage window, outside which he lingered that bleak December night.

"I have plenty of money, as you know, thanks to you—and with this," touching her veil, "I am quite safe. I will write to you at your club in a week, and give you an address that will find me," speaking, so far, with wonderful self-command. Then suddenly he saw her lips quiver below her thick veil, and she said,—"Oh! Gilbert, what—what will you say to the children when they come looking for me to-morrow? Who is to hear Alice say his prayers?"

There was no time to receive any reply to these hurried, tearful questions. Already a shrill little whistle had sounded; already the long black train was moving; already Georgie was making the second stage of her journey from home and husband and children, and all she most valued in the world.

She sank back in the carriage, utterly exhausted in both mind and body. She did not weep, she did not shed a single tear. Her heart felt like a stone.

She sat immovable in the same attitude hour after hour as the night-express tore shrieking through the surrounding blackness.

Early next morning, whilst it was still dark, they reached London.

Georgie had no luggage beyond a leather hand-bag, and she went to the waiting-room, and sat there whilst a very cross old woman made a miserable fire; and then warmed her frozen fingers, had a cup of coffee at the refreshment room, and went off in a hansom to Madame Smart, her dressmaker's.

Somehow this journey reminded her in a vague way of that day she had come up with Lizzie to answer Lady Maxwell's advertisement, only even then she was not a quarter as friendless and forlorn as she was now.

Madame Smart was at her breakfast, and in the act of decapitating a "London" egg, when, to her great amazement, she beheld a cab at the door, and one of her very best customers coming up the steps.

What could it be? A sudden mourning order? Mrs. Vernon's face looked like it truly, as she peeped over the blind. She looked as if she had lost all her nearest and dearest—as she had—and very worn and ill.

In a few moments Mrs. Vernon had made her entrance, and a few minutes more Mrs. Smart was in possession of the whole terrible story.

Georgie had made up her mind to do nothing by halves—to trust her completely. She had known her since she was quite a little girl, and had made her mother's dresses when she was not the grand West-end dressmaker she was now.

She was at the core a kind, motherly person, though she liked to pretend that she was half French, and that she made almost weekly trips to Paris for the fashions.

She was shocked, and sympathetic, and sincerely concerned for her unfortunate visitor; and being an active-minded person set about ordering in more breakfast, and actually compelling Mrs. Vernon to eat it, and then to go and lie down whilst she turned over matters in her brain.

Hearing that Mrs. Vernon had a cheque in her purse for a hundred pounds simplified arrangements a good deal; hearing also, from a previous source, that this young lady had a large fortune in her own right, gave her sympathy and activity a shape that they might not have taken had her customer been as destitute of money as she was of other things that money could not buy.

"You will be safest in London, Mrs. Vernon," she said, that same afternoon. "It's so large, and not in lodgings or in an hotel, but in a small place of your own. I know the very thing for you—a little bijou residence out by St. John's-wood. A customer of mine is leaving it—going abroad, and will be glad to let it furnished, with three servants and a boy to clean the boots, for a very moderate sum. Believe me, that's your best move—you'll be lost there. No one would dream of looking for you so far, and furnished lodgings is that public—no privacy at all; and you never know who you may meet on the stairs."

"Very well, Mrs. Smart," said Georgie, languidly. "You know best. When can I go there? Soon, I hope!"

"I should not wonder if you actually got in to-night. It's now two o'clock. I'll take a 'bus, and be there and back by four, and I'll see and move Mrs. Barrington out by seven o'clock."

"Oh, she couldn't—she wouldn't!"

"I'm pretty sure she would. She has nothing but her boxes to pack. She's just dying to go off to Cannes, and she will not refuse a 'good let,' I'm certain. I'll tell her you're an invalid, come up for doctor's advice, and if you can't get in to-night you must move elsewhere; and she'll be out, I'm sure, by seven or eight o'clock. She can go to her cousin's, and it will suit you best to get there after dark, won't it?"

"Yes, Mrs. Smart, and thank you very much indeed."

Georgie felt a frantic longing to be able to lay her head somewhere. She had a firm conviction that she was going to be very ill; her head was as heavy as lead, her hands as hot as fire; every bone in her body ached, and her reflection, as cast back by one of Mrs. Smart's long mirrors, was so ghastly and unlike herself as to be positively appalling.

Presently that lady bustled into the room in a very much-befathered bonnet, a sealskin, and a muff, and said, hastily,—

"Well, I'm off now; but, by-the-way, what name shall I say? We have not thought of that. Vernon won't do, will it?" dubiously.

"No," becoming crimson, "I have no longer any right to it. I won't be called Mrs. Blaine, though. What can I say?" passing her hand across her forehead. "Not Grey; he might trace it. I have it! Call me George—Mrs. George!"

"All right, then; that will do very well,

indeed. Your lunch is coming in now on a tray, and mind you eat it—a nice mutton chop and a bottle of porter."

A chop! porter!—when the very name of food made Mrs. George shudder.

CHAPTER XXII.

MADAME SMART was perfectly successful in her mission. She arrived home triumphant, with a complacent air of "I told you so," and assured her wretched, weary-looking inmate that "she was at liberty to enter into possession of the Bower (such was the name of the bijou residence) that very evening." Madame Smart could not spare time from her workroom for another journey, for she had two trousseaux and an Indian outfit on her mind; but she despatched Mrs. George and her bag at seven o'clock, bound for the Bower, in the charge of a confidential cabby. Before leaving, her visitor made her solemnly promise that, whatever happened, and whoever sought her, she would keep her residence a secret. The importance of being the repository of such a trust delighted the good woman, who, despite of a keen, practical turn for business and running up astonishing bills of items, such as body-lining, sleeve ditto, buttons, lace and trimmings, had in her secret heart a leaning towards romance and sensational events, and the day's little episode strongly savoured of both. "Wild horses would not drag it from me" were the very last words she whispered into Mrs. George's ear after she had leant half her body through the cab door, and nodded impressively "that half-a-crown was his fare without luggage."

It was, of course, pitch dark when Georgie drove up to her new abode. Little did she dream that she would ever be the inmate of a bijou residence in St. John's Wood as she had sat at her own fireside that very day week! When she looked back over that short space it seemed to her as if years had passed since she had been confronted by that terrible "face at the window;" but she was brought back to the present moment by the cabman flinging open the door, and saying,—

"Here we are, miss; I believe this is it?"

"This" was a blank wall, as far as she could judge by the light of a neighbouring lamp, but on closer inspection there proved to be a door in it, over which was painted in fantastic letters, "The Bower." There was also a bell, which cabby applied himself to vigorously, and rang a loud, clanging, peal, seemingly a good way off.

Presently the door was opened, and displayed a garden, a kind of wide gravel sweep, in front of a small house, the hall of which emitted a brilliant light. It was retired and private enough behind this high brick wall, was Georgie's first thought, as she descended, handed her bag to the maid, paid the cabman, and almost staggered into the house.

The parlour-maid gazed in a questioning manner at this tall, ghastly-pale young woman. Yes; she was certainly a lady who followed her into the hall, with unsteady gait and wild frightened-looking eyes. But no! her first impression was a libel—she was not intoxicated, but she looked like a person on the brink of some fearful illness. She felt the whole place swimming round her, as she stood in the narrow, little hall, made narrow by being lined with bookcases, pictures, and terra-cotta statues.

She was ushered into the drawing-room, and asked if she would have tea, or supper, or dinner by the attending and inquisitive parlour-maid, who stared in robust curiosity at this strange, new mistress, who had taken the Bower without ever having seen it, and who now collapsed into a chair in the drawing-room, without even one glance at that elaborately picturesque apartment. She never noticed the striking effects Mrs. Barrington had laboured to produce, and then immediately tired of the walls, closely covered with valuable water-colours; the long, broad, or round, and most flattering looking-glasses; the couches, divans, queer little cabinets, tables, chairs, the Persian rugs, the china, the stands of ferns—items at which other people had raised

hands and eyes and voice in astonishment and admiration. No; not one glance did those strange-looking dark grey eyes bestow on their surroundings. They simply closed their white lids, and the new arrival said, in an exhausted voice,—

"No; I don't want anything to eat. Give me your arm, and show me my room. I—I—feel as if I was dying."

Miss Binks (that was the damsel's name) ushered her upstairs to a big bedroom, with a bow window, over the drawing-room; undressed her as if she was a lay figure, and then went down to consult the cook and housemaid, who were waiting in the hall.

"She looks terrible. You'd better both come up, and have a look at her. I can't make it out. Maybe she's dying, maybe she is not. She came here just like one that was walking in her sleep, or walking into her grave."

The cook, as the eldest of the trio, went up and gravely inspected her patient (surreptitiously), and gave it as her opinion that the young lady was going to have something—a bad fever, maybe—and that in their own interests Dr. Moss, who lived at the corner, should be sent for on the spot.

"If it's anything infectious," she added, emphatically, "I'm off this very night. Mrs. Barrington has no business letting the house to anyone she has never seen. Goodness knows if we haven't a case of small-pox landed on the top of us!"

"It was not small-pox, nor anything that the cook need alarm herself about," so said Miss Binks, when she had dashed once more into the kitchen with the doctor's verdict; "but it's bad for her—brain fever he says, and he wants to know who are her friends, and where they can be found!"

"Ay, that's more than we can tell him!"

"Who's going to nurse her?" demanded the housemaid, with arms a-kimbo.

"The three of us between us, I suppose. We can't let the young lady die," said Miss Binks, who had taken a fancy to her; "and I'll sit up to-night. She's not the sort that gives much bother, and if she does, why, we must only get in a sister from the hospital."

(To be continued.)

VERNON HEATHCOTE'S MISDEED.

—102—

(Continued from page 105.)

"Nothing. Only you remind me of all that I most wish to forget."

"May I come and see you again?" his eyes devouring her beauty with a hungry stare.

"No; whilst I am here I prefer to be alone."

"Then good-bye. I cannot live alone, so you will drive me to marry someone whom I do not care for."

With a low bow he left the room, and she looked after him with a shiver.

"I cannot think what makes my blood creep," she said to herself, "whenever that man comes near me."

Only a week later he proposed to Netta Forgethly, and was joyously accepted. There was a grand wedding at St. George's, Hanover-square, and after a prolonged honeymoon the quasi happy pair settled down in 20, Grosvenor-square, the house which Mountguy had so often offered to his cousin.

The pretty brunette was delighted with her position as a popular Countess—charmed with her elegantly-furnished home, her spirited horses, her numerous carriages, and last, not least, the beauty and variety of her toilettes; but there was one important item in which she was bitterly disappointed, and that was her husband.

She had liked him so very much during her stay at The Towers, when it seemed impossible for him to tire of her society; but now she could not help confessing to herself he was a terrible wet blanket.

He never laughed, and rarely smiled, except in a cynical way, suggestive of anything but mirth.

He hated to be alone, and yet had nothing to say for hours if they sat together in the evening. If he was anywhere about the house there were no opportunities for cosy half-hours in the fire-light, for if he came in he was sure to light either gas or candles if he thought the room was growing a little dark, and make some cutting remark about a dim light being a favourite excuse for idleness.

In society he would take the lead in the conversation, and talk brilliantly for a while, then suddenly drop into a morose silence, from which nobody could rouse him.

It seemed to his wife's observant eyes as if he were brooding over some secret grief which he could not forget, but which he was most anxious to keep to himself.

"He was not like me," she thought, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I loved Guyon as much as it was possible for me to care for anyone, and yet I've got over it. He thinks he is still in love with Muriel, and I suppose that is his skeleton in the cupboard."

They had just returned from Paris at the beginning of November, and Netta had taken up her cadestick preparatory to going to bed, when she turned to her husband, saying—

"We have never had what I call a thoroughly good party since our marriage, now more than a year ago. What do you say to giving a grand ball on Christmas Eve?"

He started.

"Hang Christmas; I should like to forget it."

"But we can't do that, so we may as well make it as lively as possible."

"Oh, be as lively as you like, I shall run over to Paris."

"What! and leave me!" with wide-open eyes.

"Unless you like to come, too."

"I can't bear to leave home as Christmas."

"And I can't bear to be here."

"Is it because your cousin died on that day two years ago? That seems so very absurd."

He frowned.

"Go to bed," he said, roughly, "and don't stand there talking nonsense."

"Talking nonsense!" she repeated, with a little laugh. "You look as fierce as Irving did the other night when he smothered Deademona. I wish you had been there. Do you know I felt exactly as if I were under the pillow, and my breath seemed gone."

With an oath he started to his feet. He knew that his cheeks were livid, his lips trembling, and he dared not face his wife, and yet he must stop her or go mad.

"It must be awful to die by suffocation," she went on, perfectly unconscious of the storm she was raising, "the weight upon your chest—"

"Stop!" he shouted, and she stood still in utter amazement. "Don't you know," he added more calmly, but still with his back turned towards her, "that if you talk of these horrible things you are certain to have a nightmare?"

"Oh, is that all?" she said, coolly. "I am not afraid, for I always sleep like a top, and I don't like to be shouted at."

Then she went slowly up the stairs with elevated eyebrows.

It was about three o'clock in the morning, when she woke with a start. By the light of the night lamp, which was always kept burning, she saw a figure standing by the sofa at the other end of the room.

Rubbing her eyes, in intense surprise she saw it was her husband. Afraid to speak, though scarcely knowing why, she held her breath and watched, her heart beating fast with a strange tremor, for which she was at a loss to account.

She saw him take the chintz-covered pillow, and press it down with both hands, muttering to himself a few disjointed words which she could not catch. In an instant she guessed that he was only enacting the tragedy of Othello and Deademona in his sleep, and the thought was a comfort to her.

Still she was very glad when he released the pillow with a deep sigh, and presently returned to his bed, though she lay awake for another

hour before she had recovered sufficient calm to go to sleep.

The next morning she laughed at her husband for the nightmare he had suffered from in the night.

"What do you mean?" he asked with blanched cheeks.

She described what had occurred, adding with a laugh—

"You see it didn't attack me. You must have had a bad conscience."

"You would talk of it," he said hoarsely, as he leant back in his chair, in an attitude of hopeless dejection. After a pause, "Sleep-walking is a bad habit to get into, and I must try and drop it; but there is no reason why I should disturb you, so I shall have a bed made up in the dressing-room."

"Just as you like; I didn't complain."

Going upstairs later in the day, she noticed two housemaids in the act of moving a sofa out of the dressing-room into the adjoining bed-room.

"Oh, why are you doing that? It will make the room look so comfortable."

"I know it will, my lady, but his lordship gave express orders that it should be moved—he said it was in the way."

"Very well, but I think it is a pity," and she went into her own room to put on her bonnet for a drive.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS DAY once more, with snow-flakes fluttering in the frosty air, sunshine melting the icicles pendent from every railing, and a fresh crispness in the atmosphere, which made old people feel young again, and inclined to mix in the frolics of the children.

Lady Muriel Heathcote had just come home from church, and was sitting by the fire in her quiet lodging, her toes on the fender, her bright hair resting against the back of the chair, her bonnet on her lap.

A hansom drove up to the door, a vigorous hand hammered at the knocker, as if its owner were particularly anxious to be let in. "Only one of the lodgers," thought Muriel to herself, as she re-arranged the flower in her bonnet.

There were steps on the stairs; they stopped at her door, which was quickly opened and shut.

She looked round carelessly, supposing it was a mistake. A man clothed from head to heels in an ulster came quickly forward, and in another moment eager hands were clasping hers, and Guyon Macdougall was looking into her face with eyes that seemed anxious to read every thought of her soul.

"You are mine still?" he asked, in that full rich tone which always sent a thrill through her heart in the days gone by. "You have positively waited all these years, and I never knew it; I thought you were married long ago."

"When I was promised to you?" with a glance that tried to be reproachful, though her eyes were dancing with joy.

"They said you wanted to be rich."

"And so I do, for your sake."

"As if I cared, so long as I had you; I must have seemed such a brute—but surely you never doubted me—you knew I must be true."

"But why did you never come to say goodbye? I looked for you (very shyly) day after day."

"And I came—and she told me you couldn't see me."

"Who dared to keep you from me?" the blood rushing into her cheeks.

"Netta Forgethlym. I wrote you a letter telling you that I was quite glad you were not rich, and a lot of nonsense," a hot blush mounting to his forehead. "but she never gave it you."

"I asked her if you hadn't sent me a message, and I thought you were so unkind."

He bent down and kissed the hands which he held so tightly in his own.

"Thank Heaven it is all over," with a deep breath of thankfulness. "By lie after lie she tried to separate us, but now she has confessed it all, and I came as fast as boat and train could

bring me. My chief is awfully good to me, and when I explained the circumstances he made no difficulties about leave."

"But Guyon, what did she do it for? what could have possessed her?"

"What indeed!" blushing like a girl.

"Poor thing," very softly. "I pity her from the bottom of my heart."

"And so do I—tied to that villain Mountguyon. But don't let us talk of them. You are to come home with me at once. My mother and father are longing to see you, although they think you might have let them know where you were all this time. If it hadn't been for that good old Dormer I should never have found you out."

"And perhaps you would have consoled yourself with someone else," with a smile.

"Never!" emphatically. "You were kinder to me in the gallery at The Towers than you are to-day."

Then he stretched out his arms, and drew her to him with the utmost tenderness. His heart seemed almost bursting with joy, as after long absence their lips met once more, and the tears stood in his eyes, as he released her from his embrace.

Many questions were asked and answered before Mrs. Ward was called into the room, and her hand nearly wrung off her arm by the happy lover.

The cab was dismissed, and their *tête-à-tête* prolonged till the shadows began to fall, for hearts that have been silent for two long years have a volume to speak at last. Towards six o'clock Macdougall escorted his betrothed to the family mansion in Hyde Park Gardens, where she was warmly welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Macdougall, their two other sons, and their three daughters. She was immensely admired by all, and sensible of the pleasant impression she had produced. After so many weary months of sorrow she felt that she had reached the haven of happiness.

"A happy Christmas to you, my darling, and many of them just like this!" whispered Guyon, as he put his handsome face close to her's under a sprig of mistletoe, and with both hands clasped tightly in his, and fond eyes resting trustfully on his own, Muriel echoed the wish from the depths of her heart.

The clouds seemed all to have passed away, and after long waiting the sun broke forth in dazzling light.

Whilst the Christmas bells were ringing their joyous peal, and hearts that had been sorely tried by sorrow beat high with unexpected happiness, the Earl of Mountguyon sat alone in his dressing-room, goaded by the misery of his existence to the last desperate act of which man is capable.

Haunted by the memory of his sin he had not the courage to face his life. With no belief in eternity, no fear of perdition, he sat there pale, cold, stern, and collected, his last will and testament by his side, his pistols before him.

His wife, after knocking at the door in vain, went to bed, thinking that he had done the same. Laying her head on the pillow she prayed for peace and pardon, and with a smile on her lips went quietly off to sleep. At three o'clock in the morning she was startled by a loud report. Springing out of bed, she rushed into the dressing-room and found her husband lying dead on the floor.

The last act before he died was a deed of expiation; for it was found upon examination of his will that he had left Marchmont Towers, and all that had constituted the late Earl's private fortune, to Lady Muriel Heathcote.

Unconscious of the crime by which he had stained his fingers, Muriel had no scruples in regaining her birthright, and as she returned to her old home amongst the cheers of her faithful tenantry, her heart softened towards the cousin whom she feared to have treated too harshly.

[THE END.]

SOLDIERS in the Italian Army are permitted to sleep a couple of hours in the middle of the day. The time is fixed in the general orders.

FACETIE.

HEAD OF THE FIRM: "Humph! Booked off again to-day! What's his excuse this time? A lame one, I'll bet!" Clerk: "Yes, sir; broke his leg, sir."

PATIENT: "I am so much better to-day, doctor. I really feel as if I could stand almost anything." Doctor: "Ah, glad to hear it. Permit me to present my bill." (Patient has relapse.)

COOK: "The boarders complain that the soup tastes like thin dish-water." Mrs. Slimdick: "Goodness me! We must have forgotten to put any onion in."

SHE: "Bixby appears to be quite a bright young man. I hear he acquired enough money by writing to pay for his education at college." He: "Yes; writing home to his parents."

DOCTOR: "My dear madam, there is nothing the matter with you; you only need rest." Patient: "But, doctor, just look at my tongue." Doctor: "Needs rest, too, madam."

He (angrily): "Why did people stare at me so?" She: "Probably wondering, as we are, why we married each other." (He gave up asking her conundrums after that.)

JONES: "Look here, Smith, when you asked me to lend you that half-sovereign two months ago, you said you only wanted it for a short time." Smith: "Quite true, I only had it half an hour."

DASHLEY: "Waiter, a bottle of port." Waiter: "Yes, sir. Would you like very old port, sir?" Dashley: "Why! Is there any difference?" Waiter: "Oh, yes, sir. The old port has cobwebs on the bottles."

YOUNG MAN: "I should like to ask your advice, sir, as to whether you think your daughter would make me a suitable wife." Lawyer: "No, I don't think she would. Six-and-eightpence, please."

He: "Mary, this milliner's bill is unusually large. I thought we had decided to be economical." She: "And we have been. Haven't you given up smoking and horse-racing and the club?"

FRIEND: "Why do you send your husband's clothes to a tailor when all they need is a button?" Mrs. Manifold: "Well, the fact is my husband married so young that he never learned how to sew on buttons."

FRIEND: "You son played football at college, I am told." Fond Mamma: "Yes." Friend: "Quarter-back?" Fond Mamma: "Oh, he's nearly all back! He lost only an ear and a hand."

"Do you believe in the novel with a purpose?" said Squidrig to an author friend. "Certainly," the latter replied. "All the novels I ever wrote have the same purpose." "What is it?" "To improve my bank account."

CALLER: "Is Professor Miassem, the weather prophet, at home?" Servant: "Yes; but he can't see any one. He is suffering from shock." Caller: "My! my! Have some of his predictions come true?"

MISTRESS: "Why didn't you ring the dinner-bell, Bridget?" Bridget: "I couldn't find any, ma'am." Mistress: "Why, it is on the hall table!" Bridget: "Och, an' is it that one it is! An' yers'elf told me last night as that was the breakfast-bell!"

MAN OF THE HOUSE (in a loud and angry voice): "Confound it! Shut that door, you, out there! Shut that door, right away!" Servant (appearing with dignity): "Do yez know who yez is hollerin' at?" Man of the house (collapsed): "Oh! excuse me, Bridget! I thought it was my wife."

A PARTY of ladies and gentlemen were amusing themselves by making puns on each other's names. "Mr. Dunlop," said one of them to a well known and witty Scottish preacher, "we've made puns on all our names except yours, which we can't do." "Oh," was the reply, "nothing easier; ye jist lop off the latter part o' my name an' it's Dun."

MRS. DE PAINTEUR: "This stuff won't do at all, and you will have to take it back. It doesn't harmonize with my complexion." New Clerk (convincingly): "But, madame, it harmonised with the complexion you had when you selected it."

"Why don't you work! You're an able-bodied man," she asked the beggar. "I am that! I know it well; but I've only myself to look after, and if I got work I might be deprivin' a man with a wife and children of a job, ma'am," the kind-hearted wanderer replied.

"JENNIE," said Mr. Younghusband, "each of these clothes-bags has a hole in the bottom of it." "What clothes-bags? We haven't any clothes-bags." "Why, what's this I've been putting my collars and cuffs in all this week!" "Why, George! That's the sleeve of my dress!"

PARK GUARD: "Sorry to disturb yez, but it's too late to be sittin' here." Young Man (apologetically): "We didn't know it was so late. Fact is, we are to be married next year." Park Guard: "Begorry, d'yez think O'm fool enough to be supposin' you wor married lasht year?"

The lady had given the small boy an apple, and he had said nothing in recognition. "What does a little boy say when he gets anything?" asked the lady, inquiringly. He hesitated a moment. "Some little boys," he said, "says 'Thank you,' some says 'Much obliged,' and some just keeps thinkin' how much better an orange is than an apple."

YOUNG SAPHIRE: "Do you know, Miss Vassar, I've a great mind to frighten you by winking the boat!" Miss Vassar (an athletic young woman): "A young man like you tried that with me once and the boat upset." "Did it, really? What did you do?" "I swam ashore and notified the coroner, but the body was never recovered."

They had wandered into the conservatory. The music came to them in faint, rhythmic throbs. "I have had many men at my feet," she was saying carelessly, "but in vain. None of them met my requirements." He pondered. "Have you tried corn-plasters?" he suddenly asked. "I have known them to do the work when the most skilful chiropodists have failed."

MR. DE STYLE: "Well, are all your arrangements for a winter at the fashionable resorts completed?" Mrs. De Style: "Nearly, but I'm in such a quandary. I have arranged to send our house plants to a florist, our cat to a cat's home, and our dog to a canine boarding-house, so that all will be cared for until summer; but what in the world shall I do with the baby?"

MAGISTRATE (to prisoner): "You were caught in the act of opening a bedroom window." Prisoner: "Yes, your worship. I believe in hygiene, and I was only going to open the window an inch or two for the benefit of the occupant's health. It's frightfully unhealthy to sleep with your bedroom window completely shut up, your worship!"

"Well, John, did you take the note I gave you to Mr. Smithers?" inquired a gentleman of his rustic servant. "Yes, sir," replied John, "I took the note, but I don't think he can read it." "Cannot read it!" exclaimed the gentleman. "Why so, John?" "Because he is so blind, sir. While I wor in the room he axed me where my hat was, and it wor on my head all the time!"

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Uptodate to her favourite gossip, "six months after we were married Jack and I made up our minds that we weren't a bit suited for each other; so, like sensible people, we faced the inevitable. Jack lets me go my way, and—" "You let him go his!" interrupted the listener. "Good gracious, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Uptodate, indignantly, "I should just like to see him try it!"

MR. CHITMAN: "Well, Uncle Jehiel, we have enjoyed our visit to you exceedingly. I'm sure the children never had a better time in their lives. I want you to call on us next winter, to let me repay your kindness." Uncle Jehiel: "Wal, I don't know as me or the old woman kin git up to see you, but, if we don't, I'll send five or six of the mule colts. I low they would about do the same damage 'round the place that your boys has done here."

A NEW curate at a small village in Dorset met a farmer's boy while visiting his parishioners. In the course of conversation the boy said his parents had an aunt living with them. The parson, not understanding the boy's brogue, asked: "Then do I understand that your aunt is on your father's side or your mother's?" To which the young agriculturist replied: "Well, sometimes one, and sometimes t'other, 'cepting when feyther whacks 'em both."

WITH pardonable pride a lady displayed a very ancient piece of house linen to her servant, saying, as she held it up for her inspection, "Look! Bridget, at this tablecloth. It has been in our family for over two hundred years." Bridget eyed the article in question, carefully, and then, stepping close up to her mistress, remarked, in a most confidential tone, "Sure, never mind, Mrs. Arthur, dear. If you just kape quiet about it, and don't let on to anybody, who would know but what it was bought bran'-new out of the shop?"

SCENE: Railway cutting near lunatic asylum, vicinity of Glasgow. Navvies busy filling and barrowing away excavated soil. Inmate of asylum, looking on over fence, addresses navvy stretching his back. Inmate: "Hard work that!" Navvy: "Troth an' it is." Inmate: "Whit pay dae ye get?" Navvy: "Sixteen bob a week." Inmate: "Are ye mairrit?" Navvy: "I am, worse luck!—and have six children." A pause; then: Inmate: "I'm thinking, ma man, ye're on the wrang side o' the fence."

A FEW days ago two ladies, one of whom carried a baby, entered an upholsterer's shop and asked to be shown some carpets. The shopman cheerfully unrolled carpet after carpet, and delivered a flowery harangue upon their individual merits, until the perspiration flowed from every pore in his body. Finally one of the ladies suggested that it was time to go, but her companion did not agree with her, adding in an undertone: "Baby likes to see him roll them out, and the train doesn't go for twenty minutes yet."

OLD JOHN was a shoemaker, an Irishman, and an ardent admirer of the Duke of Wellington. To describe the battle of Waterloo was his chief pleasure. He always wound up the narrative, sitting with his hammer poised, his spectacles pushed back on his forehead, and his whole appearance indicating the utmost enthusiasm, with the words: "An' the Duke sez, sez he, 'Up, Gyards, an' at 'em!' an' wid that, simultaneously, at the same time, all to onet, the Gyards upped an' atted at 'em. An' that settled it."

The teacher in Geography was putting the class through a few simple tests. "On which side of the earth is the North Pole?" she inquired. "On the north side," came the unanymous answer. "On which side is the South Pole?" "On the south side." "Now on which side are the most people?" This was a poser, and nobody answered. Finally a very young scholar held up his hand. "I know," he said hesitatingly, as if the excess of his knowledge was too much for him. "Good for you," said the teacher, encouragingly. "Tell the class on which side the most people are." "On the outside," piped the youngster. And whatever answer the teacher had in her mind was lost in the shuffle.

In a public school a little fellow named Tom Stone always found an excuse for not attending the school on examination day. One day, however, he was obliged to attend, as he could find no excuse to remain at home. He, therefore, took his seat at the back of the class, in hopes that the inspector would pass him over without questioning him; but his hopes were of short duration, for the inspector, pointing to him, asked: "Now, my little man, can you tell me in which battle Lord Nelson met with his death?" Tom, knowing he was the little man referred to, stood up, despair written on his face. "Lord Nelson, did you say, sir?" "Yes, Lord Nelson," replied the inspector. "Why, sir," Tom said, with a look of surprise at what he thought to be the simplicity of the question, "I s'pect it must have been his last one."

SOCIETY.

PRINCE CAROL'S baby sister is the Queen's nineteenth great grandchild!

THE Duchess of York looks strong and well and happy, and is somewhat stouter than she was before leaving England for Switzerland.

THE Duke and Duchess of Connaught will reside at Alderhot until they go to Osborne for the Christmas holidays.

THE Princess of Wales has arranged to proceed to Russia if the Empress sends her a summons. It is well known that these two sisters have always been devoted to each other.

THE Queen has made several purchases from the Royal Irish School of Needlework, and has ordered a very handsome three-fold screen to be completed and sent to her at Balmoral. The Queen's encouragement of Irish ladies' needlework means a great deal to many who are more sadly in need of help and encouragement than is generally realized.

NOR the least part of the poor Czar's case is his terrible suffering. This is all the worse on account of his great physical strength. In order to make his torture as far as possible endurable every plan is being tried, among others Carter's invalid couch. One of the newest and best of these admirable inventions, was recently despatched post haste to St. Petersburg to be sent on to Livadia.

PRINCESS LOUIS OF Battenberg and her children, who have been staying at Darmstadt, will spend most of the winter at Malta, in order to be near Prince Louis. The Prince will be stationed in the Mediterranean during the commission of his new ship, the *Cambrian*. Princess Louis accompanied her sister, Princess Alix of Hesse, to Livadia.

EMPEROR FREDERICK of Germany is the only one of Queen Victoria's own daughters who possesses the right to array herself in martial attire. She is colonel-in-chief of the Second Regiment of Prussian Hussars, and rode at the head of her corps through the streets of Berlin at the close of the Franco-German war.

THE Duke and Duchess of Fife are to pay a visit to the Prince and Princess of Wales at Sandringham before they settle at Castle Rising for the winter. The deer drives in Mar Forest were most successful, but the Princess of Wales and her daughters did not obtain much fishing, owing to the river being so low. Their favourite angling ground is the Glen Dee water, above the Linn, where the river flows through a vast solitude surrounded by mountains. The Duke of Fife has about seventeen miles of fishing on the Dee, from the top of the Glen down to the Invercauld boundary; but the best sport is usually obtained in May and June.

DURING the manoeuvres in Germany the army is expected to "rough it," officers and men chafing alike very often, for the sake of discipline and example. While in Garzweiler, Prince Adolf of Schaumburg-Lippe, brother-in-law of the Emperor, entered a farmhouse one day, with the modest request, "Can you boil me some eggs?" "Willingly, Herr Lieutenant," answered the woman, but hesitating all the same, "if there was only someone at hand to rock the baby while I fetch them." "Oh, I can attend to that," answered the Prince, and seating himself beside the cradle, he rocked the infant in the most scientific manner until the mother returned!

THE most extraordinary precautions are taken in Spain to provide for the safety of the sovereign at night. His slumbers are watched throughout the night by the Monteros de Espinosa, a body of men who, for four hundred years, have enjoyed the exclusive privilege of guarding their royal master or mistress from sunset to sunrise. They are bound by tradition to be natives of the town of Espinosa, and to have served with honour in the army. They lock the palace gates with much ceremony and solemnity at midnight, and open them again at seven o'clock in the morning. Their fidelity to the person of their sovereign does not admit of question.

STATISTICS.

KANGAROOS have been known to jump thirty-four feet.

On an average a cow yields 350 gallons of milk a year.

ONE-FIFTH of the members of the House of Commons belong to the legal profession.

ONLY one out of every 1,000 married couples live to celebrate their golden wedding.

THE cotton spindles of Japan have increased from forty-three thousand in 1888 to over eight hundred thousand at present. Japan aims not alone at military but at industrial supremacy in the far East.

GEMS.

A DESIRE to resist oppression is implanted in the nature of man.

THE greatest gift we bestow on others is a good example.

WE love to expect, and when expectation is either disappointed or gratified, we want to be again expecting.

SIN is to be overcome, not so much by maintaining a direct opposition to it, as by cultivating opposite principles.

WERE men so enlightened and studious of their own good as to act by the dictates of their reason and reflection, and not the opinion of others, conscience would be the steady ruler of human life, and the words truth, law, reason, equity, and religion could be but synonymous terms for that only guide which makes us pass our days in our own favour and approbation.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

TAPIoca ICE.—One cup of tapioca soaked overnight. In the morning put on the stove, and when boiling hot add one cup of sugar, and boil until clear. Chop one pineapple, pour the tapioca over it, stir together and put into moulds. When cold serve with sugar and cream. Other fruits may be used.

FRUIT PUFF-PUDING.—Mix well one pint of flour, one and one-half teaspoonfuls of baking powder and a little salt. Make into a soft batter with milk. Put into well greased cups a spoonful of batter, then one of any fruit preferred, then another of batter. Steam twenty minutes. Serve with liquid sauce.

LEMON DUMPLINGS.—One pint flour, one heaping teaspoonful baking powder and salt sifted together. Mix with a cup of milk or water. Make a syrup of one-half cup treacle, one-half cup sugar, two cups water, and two lemons sliced fine. Bring to a boil and drop in dumplings, and cook fifteen minutes. Turn them once while cooking. When the dumplings are taken out, add a little butter to the syrup and pour over them.

RUSKS.—Scald a pint of milk, add one-fourth cupful of sugar, two tablespoonfuls of butter, and one and a half teaspoonfuls of salt. When luke-warm add one-third of a yeast cake dissolved in one-fourth cupful of water and three cupfuls of bread flour. Let the dough rise, then add one egg and the yolks of two well beaten, and enough more flour to knead. Let it rise again, form into rolls, let rise, then cut the top to make a crease, brush over with the whites of two eggs beaten slightly, two tablespoonfuls of sugar, one tablespoonful of water, and three-fourths of a teaspoonful of vanilla. Sprinkle with sugar and bake in a hot oven twenty minutes. When kneading take five minutes for the work. Let the dough rise to double its bulk.

MISCELLANEOUS.

PAPER is used as a substitute for rubber on bicycle tyres.

WHILE the elephant appears clumsy it is really one of the most nimble animals of Asia.

THE Post Office has a very practical way of dealing with fines inflicted upon clerks who come late to business. The sum mulcted from the erring one's pay is spent in the purchase of a stamp, which is placed opposite his name on the list, and then obliterated.

It has often been told how instruments have been made delicate enough to punch a hole in a human hair. A Parisian genius excels this in the invention of a machine that will split one hair longitudinally into thirty-six strips. He claims that some day he will be able to split the thread of a spider's web.

A WELSHMAN proposes to build a ship that will have a speed of sixty miles an hour. The boat will be 550 feet long and 50 feet wide, with a flat bottom and wedge-shaped bow and stern; of 10,000 tons displacement, and with eight paddle-wheels on each side, each making seventeen revolutions a minute.

THERE seems to be no doubt that the umbrella was first introduced into Italy from the East, and thence found its way into Europe. The applicability of the instrument as a defence from rain was quite an afterthought, and it was originally, as in the East, only used to protect the person from the rays of the sun.

A FERN from Japan, called by some the sword fern, is easily grown, and is becoming quite popular. This fern has very long, narrow fronds that seem never to get fully unrolled. Sometimes, when the pot containing the fern is on a table of ordinary height, the ends of the fronds will rest on the floor.

A PECULIAR whistle language, used on Gomera Island, in the Canary Archipelago, is a sort of pendant to the drum-language of Cameroon. The Gomera can carry on any conversation by means of whistling, and be understood by the person with whom he is conversing a mile off. The whistling is quite articulate, and is a kind of translation of common speech into whistling, each syllable having its peculiar tone, so that even foreign words can be whistled.

THE Hudson River was called by its discoverer "The Great River of the Mountains." Subsequently it was styled "The Nassau," after the reigning family of Holland; then "The Mauritius," from Prince Maurice. Later, this beautiful stream was called the "North River," in distinction from the Delaware, known among the Dutch as the "South River." It was not until after 1664 that the name Hudson was given by the English. Many curious names were applied to it by the Indians who lived upon its banks.

CAREFUL weighing shows that an ordinary bee, not loaded, weighs the one five-thousandth part of a pound, so that it takes five thousand bees, not loaded, to make a pound. But the loaded bee, when he comes in fresh from the fields and flowers, loaded with honey or bee bread, weighs nearly three times more—that is to say, he carries nearly twice his own weight. Of loaded bees there are only about eighteen hundred in the pound. An ordinary hive of bees contains from four to five pounds of bees, or between twenty and twenty-five thousand individuals, but some swarms have double this weight and number of bees.

THE greatest cities of ancient times were Babylon and Rome. The former is said to have had an area of 100 to 200 square miles; its houses were three or four stories high, but palaces and gardens occupied much of the vast area, so that the population was not what these figures would seem to indicate. In fact, it is said by one historian that nine-tenths of this area was taken up by gardens and orchards. The total population of the city under Nebuchadnezzar and his son, Evil-Merodach, is estimated at over 2,000,000. Rome reached its greatest size during the fourth century of our era, and its population was then about 2,500,000.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

FRANKIE.—Ask at the Admiralty.
ECO.—It can be got out with benzine.
E. P. G.—There is no law to prevent it.
CURIOUSE.—A parish is a Hindoo beggar.
H. R.—Certainly; get an ocean postal order.
DUNSTAN.—Inquire at the Inland Revenue Office.
HAIC.—The book you mention is of no great value.
OLD READER.—No, the parents are not responsible.
R. A. C.—October the 11th, 1886, fell on a Monday.
ROSECRICK.—Entirely unnecessary and horribly cruel.
T. A.—A soldier is not permitted to have any politics.
E. B.—The quotation is certainly not from the Bible.
TROUBLESHOME.—We neither give addresses nor reply by post.
IN ANXIETY.—We know of none applicable to the case.
INQUIRITIVE.—We do not know anything of the person named.
J. R.—Several; some in America, some on the Continent.
EMILIE.—Basel (otherwise Basle or Bale) is in Switzerland.
SUBARNA.—After washing never wring worsted dress goods. Shake them.
CONVARIANT READER.—Perfectly uninterested persons would be better than either.
DETRACTED.—A lodger's furniture can be detained for rent due by him.
UNEMPLOYED.—Vacancies are advertised from time to time in the daily papers.
JOHN J.—Business addresses are not given in this department.
CYNTHIA.—We should think it would be much cheaper for you to buy all ready made.
OLD SUBSCRIBER.—You had better consult a respectable solicitor in the matter.
IGORAMUS.—Per cent. is per hundred; 34 per cent. would be £3 10s. upon £100.
WILHELMINA.—Counterpoint is the blending of melodies, harmony the blending of tones.
D. F.—We do not know, but possibly the Inspector of the district might be able to tell.
ROBBIE.—An apprentice is entitled to receive his indenture on the expiration of the term.
ACTING MAD.—Mr. Irving was born in Somersetshire.
INURED.—Unless the dog was known to be savage, and to bite, compensation cannot be recovered.
SAMUEL B.—Coin books containing addresses of dealers, &c., can be obtained at most book-stores.
ADMIRING READER.—She should read all she can and, above all, try to fully comprehend what she reads.
ALEXIS.—The British Empire comprehends rather more than a sixth of the land surface of the globe.
INTERESTED.—The war in Corea has arisen out of the determination of Japan to restore order in that country.
LOYALTY.—Yes; the existence of three direct male heirs is unprecedented in our Royal Family.
ONE IN TROUBLE.—We are afraid you are in the hands of your creditor, and that you have no good defence to any action he may bring.
COOKIE.—Half teaspoonful of salt and quarter teaspoon pepper to each pound of beef should be seasoning enough.
TROUBLED ONE.—Consult an experienced physician, in good standing, who can give you his personal attention.
M. O. F.—No receptacle for soiled clothing, even if handsomely decorated, should be kept in a sleeping-room.
ZILLIE.—All presents given in contemplation of marriage can be recovered, if the marriage is broken off.
G. S.—All chief constables have discretionary power to take a man under standard who is otherwise specially fitted.
RED.—War was declared with Russia (the Crimean war) on 27th March, 1854, and peace was concluded on 31st March, 1856.
WORRIED.—The fact that one of the parties was under age when the ceremony was performed will not invalidate the marriage.
ELLIE.—It is used for brushing the teeth, and is considered very useful in keeping the teeth and gums in a healthy condition.
SUB ROSA.—To become an attorney you would have to serve an articles clerkship of five years, and pass several examinations.
HILDEGARDE.—The child takes its nationality from its father; you are therefore German, notwithstanding your maternal connection.

QUEST.—The vicar and churchwardens may cause the churchyard to be closed, but whether the vicar can do so alone we cannot tell.
AMBITIOUS.—The thing that his mind inclines to most is the line he should select, with determination to stick to it and make it succeed.
BEWY.—A "billion," in English reckoning, is a million millions; in the French notation it is used to denote a thousand millions.
LISA.—Washing the hands in water containing a few drops of carbolic acid will keep the skin firm; or strong hot salt water will have the same effect.
C. F.—You are not justified in removing from your front door the number placed there by the local authority. If you do you can be summoned and fined.
MARGARET.—In laying away fine white summer gowns they should be first wrapped in blue paper, then in a sheet or in a muslin wrap of some kind.
EDIE.—May possibly be removed by sponging with ammonia and warm water mixed, and then rinsing with clean water before ironing the place.
BASIL.—Literary copyright lasts during the life of the author and seven years after his death, or for forty-two years from the first publication, if that be the longer period.
C. J. B.—A crossed cheque is payable only to a banker; that is to say, it is given to a banker, and he collects the money from the person who issued the cheque.
E. J.—Might be cleaned by sponging with a weak solution of benzine, but if much soiled would require to be dipped in benzine baths, for which purpose you should send it to the cleaners.

ONLY REST.

THE sun came up in the cloudless sky,
 A little child watched it with dancing eye.
 "Oh the days are long, the days are bright,
 And the sun will shine again till the night;
 And while I sleep in my little bed,
 The sun will be coming again," she said.

The sun came up in the azure sky,
 And a young girl watched it with happy eye.
 "Oh, this life is gay, this life is bright,
 And swift go the days in their happy flight.
 No heart can ache while the soul is fed
 With the dreams of heaven-born love," she said.

The sun came up in the cloud-flecked sky,
 And a woman watched it with tear-dimmed eye.
 "The day is long and long is the night,
 And all is desolate within my sight.
 My hopes and pleasures they all are dead;
 I long for the sun to go down," she said.

The sun came up in the darkening sky,
 And an old woman looked at it wearily.
 "I know it shines back there and is light,
 But the rest of my walk must be by night.
 If there be brightness it's on ahead,
 Through the valley and shadow of death," she said.

Oh, weary hearts, there is so much pain,
 There is so much loss and so little gain.
 In this long strife for that which is best,
 At last all we ask is a little rest,
 If battle be lost or battle be won,
 Just a little rest when the day is done.

K. B.

DEBONO.—It is not lawful to shoot a burglar, even in the actual fact, unless it can be proved that his capture could not be effected, or that there were no other means of resisting him.

FASHIONABLE FANNY.—Thick white linen paper is usually preferred, although many young women like tints, cream-white, pale amber or buff, and sometimes delicate flesh tints or Nile green.

UNHAPPY.—Reform your speech by reading slowly and aloud for half an hour or so every day. Stuttering is a habit chiefly caused by the desire to speak too rapidly.

HOUSEWIFE.—Take twice as much white or red lead (dry) as oatmeal with treacle enough to form a dough; put pieces of this down where cockroaches can get it and they will soon be cleared out.

A CONVARIANT READER.—The offices of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are at 105, Jamaica-street, St. James's, London. All communications should be addressed to the secretary.

WREATHFUL ONE.—If you sue them the court will over-haul their books for them, and make them pay roundly for the trouble. It is a shameful thing for them to attempt to defraud you in such a manner.

BOB.—Put back of spotted picture to fire, and after it is thoroughly heated brush it very gently with a clean cloth; that will remove the spots if they are not ingrained; if they are nothing will take them out.

SCHOOLBOY.—Alexander Selkirk, for many years a solitary sojourner on the island of Juan Fernandez, and upon whose narrative Defoe based his story of "Robinson Crusoe," was born at Largo, in Fife, Scotland.

MISERABLE MILDRED.—There is no cure for blushing, except arranging a system of what you will do and say in meeting people, or being spoken to; you will not then be taken unawares, and need not blush.

R. T. B.—Anyone is at liberty to open an educational institution, and call it college if he likes, without let or hindrance from law; it is not even necessary that the person should be a certificated teacher.

LEILA.—Legally a woman is under the control of her parents up to twenty-one; but if she chooses to leave home at eighteen, and is able to earn her own living, we do not know that she can be prevented from doing so.

IN NEED OF ADVICE.—To make cream pancakes, take the yolks of two eggs, mix them with half a pint of good cream and two ounces of sugar. Rub a pan with lard, and fry them as thin as possible. Grate sugar over them, and serve hot.

A. G. A.—It has probably been allowed to get wet. This causes the "musty smell." No disinfectant would cure it. It must be thoroughly dried. We can only suggest your taking the stuffed portion to pieces, substitute new stuffing, or cleanse and thoroughly dry the old.

JANET.—To polish ivory, remove any scratches or marks that may be present with finely pulverized pumice-stone, moistened with water. Then wash the ivory and polish with prepared chalk, applied moist upon a piece of chamois leather, rubbing quickly.

OSSET.—You do not say what material your dress is of. It might do to wet it all and iron it with a mangle between, or it might do to sponge it over and iron it; probably it will want cleaning or dyeing; it all depends on the material it is made of.

ELIZABETH STUART.—To make oyster pancakes, mix together equal measures of sylvester liquor and milk. To one pint of this mixture add one pint of wheat flour, a few oysters, two eggs, and a little salt. Drop the mixture by spoonfuls into hot lard, and fry the cakes a nice brown.

M. G.—The two modes of providing for a wife in France are designated by the terms *dot* and *dower*. The former is defined to be that which the wife brings in marriage; the latter is the right which the wife has to a certain portion of the estate of the husband upon his death.

BERNARD K.—The prerogative is in the hands of Royalty; all the Premier can do is to recommend certain parties for titles; it would be without precedent to elevate a man from commoner rank to a dukedom at a bound; he may be made a baron or lord, then later on a marquis or a duke.

JULIA.—Brush the place very well, then take warm soap suds and wash, and use a brush to scrub the place clean; if there is green in the carpet you might rub over afterwards with cold water and a little vinegar in it, as vinegar brightens light green; and with clean towels rub up till dry.

HANNAH.—Specks and dirt may be removed by going over the surface with a cloth wet in water, then wipe perfectly dry with a soft linen cloth and go over the wood with a rag dipped in olive or almond oil, after which polish it with a chamois or some piece of old kid gloves.

CONNER.—Yes, but great care must be taken to wash the face thoroughly at night, otherwise the preparation may clog the pores and make the skin rough and possibly bring out a crop of pimples. Indeed, extreme care in washing the face is necessary if one would have a good complexion.

DORCAS.—The stage is a precarious profession for a young girl without the protection of parents. For one *débutante* that succeeds, ninety-nine fail, and for one that attains the rank of prima donna and makes a fortune, a thousand almost starve—and so are placed within the reach of the lowest possible temptation.

MILDRED.—Once a month make good lather on your head with the yolks of two raw eggs. When you have rubbed them in a bit moisten with tepid water, and finally wash clean out with tepid water, dry thoroughly and next day rub in ordinary paraffin oil, which later repeat once a week.

EVA.—The fur has evidently been attacked by the moth, which you must search for and remove, then rub in plenty of powdered camphor and ground pepper. Rub off all you can on a rag, then on each batch rub in a little salt, on that sprinkle well with powdered chalk, then moisten the chalk, dry slowly, and rinse. It may be necessary to repeat the process; rinse after each attempt.

THE LONDON READER, Post-free. Three-halfpence Weekly; or Quarterly, One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL BACK NUMBERS, PARTS AND VOLUMES are in print, and may be had of all Booksellers.

NOTICE.—Part 895, Now Ready, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. LXIII, bound in cloth, 1s. 6d.

THE INDEX to Vol. LXIII is Now Ready; Price One Penny, post-free, Three-halfpence.

ALL LETTERS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE LONDON READER, 334, Strand, W.C.

††† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

London: Published for the Proprietor, at 334, Strand, by G. F. CORNFORD; and printed by WOODFALL and KNEELAND, 70 to 76, Long Acre, W.C.